

LIKE MEN DO: STORIES

By

Anthony D.E. Wilson

Submitted to the

Faculty of the College of Arts & Sciences

of American University

in Partial Fulfillment of

the Requirements for the Degree

of Master of Fine Arts

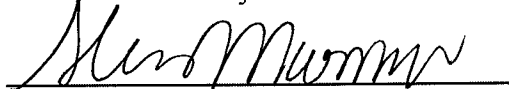
In

Creative Writing

Chair:



Rachel Louise Snyder



Glenn Moomau



Dean of the College of Arts & Sciences

April 22, 2011

Date

2011

American University

Washington, D.C. 20016

© COPYRIGHT

by

Anthony D.E. Wilson

2011

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

## DEDICATION

To David, Jack, Lisa and Walter.

# LIKE MEN DO: STORIES

BY

Anthony D.E. Wilson

## ABSTRACT

This collection examines the often-hidden emotions of men, the frequently tenuous relationship between fathers and sons, and the way men act when they aren't the way society wants them to be. Brothers, both adopted, face the prospect of being fathers themselves; a lonely man finds connection through violence; a best friend wonders how far he can go to repay his indebtedness; a giant seeks to find what makes him feel small; a father considers the gravity of his betrayal as he looks back on the mistakes of his own dad; and a man looks back on a night decades earlier that exemplified the helplessness he feels. Amidst all of these stories are narratives about how men live in a world of expectations, where acknowledging the depth of their souls often is seen as a weakness instead of strength.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to thank all the men in my life who inspired these stories, whether through their presence or their absence. I owe a debt of gratitude to all the professors who have helped me recognize what's good and what's not, including Denise Orenstein, E.J. Levy, Andrew Holleran, Richard McCann and David Keplinger. Also, a hat tip is due to all the other students in American University's graduate creative writing program, who daily provide inspiration and welcome criticism. I want to thank my thesis committee, Glenn Moomau and Rachel Louise Snyder, whose comments pushed this piece further than I thought it could go. Finally, I couldn't have finished these stories without the help of my fiancée Jessica, who encouraged me, critiqued my work, allowed me to bounce ideas off her, and generally made it possible for me to complete this project. Thank you all.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .....	ii
----------------	----

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	iii
------------------------	-----

### Stories

THE CHILL .....	1
-----------------	---

THE CABIN .....	7
-----------------	---

GIVEN THE CHANCE .....	24
------------------------	----

LETTING DEAD CATS LIE.....	48
----------------------------	----

THE CHALLENGE OF CONNECTING.....	61
----------------------------------	----

STANDING ON HIS OWN.....	85
--------------------------	----

FEAR OF HEIGHT .....	111
----------------------	-----

## THE CHILL

I remember Charlie. A year younger than us, Charlie's parents had thought it a good idea to have him skip a grade as a way of "challenging" him. The day he first walked into class, a girl in the front row told him he was in the wrong class, that he belonged in second grade. Charlie didn't even hesitate; he just slumped into the center seat of the front row, right in front of the teacher's desk. Inevitably, Charlie's papers passed our desks with bright red A's and smiley faces slathered across the top, but he rarely spoke in class. When he did, his voice, soft as tissue paper, was barely heard above the exasperated sighs of kids in the back of the room.

I can't say I was friends with him, but I might have been the closest thing to a friend he had, which is to say he didn't really have any friends at all. In fact, I only qualified as a "friend" because I was one of the few who didn't physically or verbally assault him in the hallways of school on a daily basis. Charlie easily was the smallest kid in our class, boy or girl, and nearly all of the other students in our grade, and even some of the students in lower grades, pushed him around. When I walked past him, I gave him a nod of my chin to acknowledge his presence. Usually, Charlie didn't even see me; he was too focused on his shoelaces to look up, and even if he did his floppy brown hair, uncut for months at a time, obscured his hazel eyes. Only when another student intentionally bumped him in the hallway, knocking his books into flight, did he look up.

Once, I was at school in the morning before even most of the teachers, Charlie was setting up his 25-foot moving exhibit examining the physics of interplanetary movement. All nine planets, in the form of foam balls and proportionate in size, hung from wires emanating from a central yellow sun. Each planet was painted perfectly; it looked like Charlie airbrushed them. They were so detailed that the sun even featured hotspots and Saturn had 60 tiny moons surrounding it. In between each planet, Charlie erected a sign discussing its angle of spin and gravitational mass. If any other student had entered Charlie's project, the judges surely wouldn't believe that entrant had worked alone. There was no doubt with Charlie, though, and it was a shoe-in to win.

I laid down my real, live exploding volcano ("Guaranteed to Win Your Science Fair," the advertisement at the hobby shop said) next to his project, which dwarfed mine. I noticed Charlie was having trouble reaching the top of a pole holding up Pluto. I walked up behind him. He flinched. I helped him reposition the smallest planet.

"Thank you," he whispered.

"No worries, Charlie. I'm a bit taller than you."

He turned away from me and I couldn't hear his answer. I saw him at the end of the day again when we were all packing up our projects, but I didn't get a chance to ask him what he meant because I had to rush home.

I didn't see Charlie again until the next home football game. When I was eight years old, Friday night football games represented the pinnacle of our social lives. I stood with my friends beneath the bleachers, hidden by the crowd above and the noise all around. We told our parents we were going to the football game. The truth was that most



of us would just rush around the end of the grandstands after the final whistle, trying to catch the score before the lights went out on the scoreboard. Our parents always asked, as if they cared who won. We knew they were just trying to catch us skipping out on the game and causing trouble, because that's what we were doing.

Packs of boys gathered, moving in rhythm like swarms of bugs, our collective breaths combining to make one big cloud behind us. And how we would *run*. We ran forever, jumping over the low metal rungs and ducking under the bleacher supports, like we were training for a future on the field. We ran until our cheeks were ruddy red, our faces were frozen and our noses needed tissues we didn't have. Our sleeves made do. We ran as if there were something to run to. The hats and gloves doled out at the mudroom door before we left were stuffed in our jean-jacket pockets or tossed aside. After all these years, the games blend together that season, cold like leftovers, and a creeping suspicion that it was a miserable season, as most were back then.

It was not out of the ordinary at the games to see a group of boys surrounding Charlie, moving with him as a pack like he was the ball in a youth soccer game. I'm sure Charlie didn't want to be there, but his parents came to every game with him in tow. I remember being amazed that he was at every game that season, announcing his presence with worn-out sneakers scuffing the pavement. I suppose he could've sat with his parents, but I'm sure the embarrassment of that would have outweighed what he'd endured.

As always, it started with one boy making fun of Charlie, and Charlie following the advice of every parent and every teacher who had forgotten what it was like to be a kid getting made fun of, "Just ignore them and they'll go away." He ignored them. They

didn't go away. Instead, they pushed Charlie farther under the bleachers, where none of the parents could see, and yelled, "Fag," "homo," "funboy," "loser." The taunts seemed to wither him from within; he was not rubber, and he shrunk with each comment. The other boys, getting no reaction from Charlie, moved to phase two: shoving.

Charlie became a bony pinball bounced between far-fleshier fingers and hands. I remember this because I stood by, my eyes following Charlie as he lurched forward when pushed from behind and stumbled backward when shoved from the front. Typically, Charlie just took it, outlasted it, flopped around until the other boys' boredom drew them away from the shoving circle. This time, though, he went rigid, put his elbow up as he was propelled forward, catching one boy, Brad, in the throat. The group of boys stilled in a circular formation, just as stunned as Brad. Charlie's eyes were high; I had never seen them that clearly before.

I'll never know why Charlie did what he did next. Maybe he had just reached his breaking point. Maybe something else had happened to him earlier in the day to put ice in his veins. I guess only God knows.

Whatever the reason, Charlie dropped to a knee. He stayed down for a few moments, as if deep in thought or maybe prayer. The other boys, still stunned, stood motionless, except for Brad, who slowly regained his composure and stood up.

Suddenly, Charlie stood up and turned toward Brad. As if the flying elbow buoyed his confidence, Charlie froze his gaze on the boy. Brad, unsettled at first by Charlie's aggressive demeanor, paused for a moment, then feigned a step at Charlie, his right side flinching toward him. On the field, A whistle blew.

“GOD DAMMIT!” Charlie’s voice, almost guttural, was far more powerful than I expected. “I’m not gonna take this anymore, you mother ... FUCKER!” He paused, dropped his left arm to his side and slowly straightened his right arm to fall into a point at Brad. “Fuck YOU!”

The point did it. Brad launched himself at Charlie, his right first swinging over his head and landing on Charlie’s jaw. He followed through with his left, as if he were a trained boxer. Brad unleashed his fury on Charlie, blow after blow landing about his head. Shouts of “Fight, fight, fight” broke out underneath the bleachers, encircling Charlie and Brad. The crowd grew to five people deep, a buzz of shouts and gasps combining to silence single voices.

I stood alone outside the circle, motionless. I could smell the combination of cold air, burned leaves and cigarette smoke. I took a step forward to the circle, but was shoved aside by an older boy straining his neck to see over the pack. At my level, I could see over most of the other kids. I could step in and do something. I was still frozen, knowing that stepping in would mean my own beating, would mean suffering the same fate, day after day. I knew I could put my reputation on the line, hoping that the boys who liked me would help me out, but that was risky. Even if I was bigger than most of the other boys in my class, I couldn’t withstand a group assault. I wanted to do something, but I couldn’t.

Charlie suffered that night. He went home with a bloody nose, a fat lip and a host of other bruises. The worst injury was to his ego. He finally stood up for himself, and it hadn’t mattered. He’d gotten beaten down anyway.

Charlie transferred schools soon afterward, and I didn't see him again until at least 15 years later. I was visiting my parents for Christmas, and I stopped at the grocery store to pick up some things for Mom. A stooped man ahead of me was holding up the line, taking his time scribbling out a check. When he looked up, I saw that it was Charlie. He looked older than his 30-some years. He was balding, and his face was pockmarked. He looked tired, like he had been carrying a very heavy stone for a long, long time. I started to say hello, but I stopped myself. I thought that he might not want to be reminded of his past.

I often think about that night when I'm driving in my car, alone. I think about it when I see high school football scores in the paper. I think about it whenever the first frost hits, when I step outside before I realize the temperature and the cold hits me in the face. Sometimes I turn the air conditioning on while I'm driving in my car, just to capture a hint of the chill I'd feel standing beneath the bleachers. It's the weight of that night with Charlie, and the weight of all my other missed opportunities, that holds me down, pins me to the wall in a time of action, sinks inside me in the form of nausea. If only I could have been more courageous. I deserve the cold chill, and I give it to myself.

## THE CABIN

I went to my father's cabin for the first time when I was 31, six months after he died. It wasn't a vacation. The last thing I wanted to do was drive six hours to the middle of rural Wisconsin to a cabin I'd never seen, but it was the last thing on the list, "What to do when someone dies," that I'd printed for her from the Internet. I'd already sorted through his will, filed a death certificate and filled out Social Security documentation. I had cleaned out his closet and donated anything that was still good to charity and recycled the stacks of newspapers he used to keep in the mudroom by the back door. The last thing on my list was to clear out the cabin and sell it. Once that was done, I could move on and I could forget about my father, once and for all.

I knew almost nothing about the cabin, so I had no idea how large it was or how big a project I was getting myself into. It could've been anything from a one-room shack, sparsely decorated, to a larger place packed full of all the stuff Dad didn't have room for in our house in the suburbs of Appleton. So I took a week off of work, figuring if it took me only a day I could relax for the other six, and made plans for the six-hour drive from Chicago to the middle of the woods north of Lac du Flambeau. Wisconsin is cold in the middle of February, but I knew little else to expect when I got there, which made packing difficult. Eventually, I threw as many warm clothes as I could into the back seat of my Saturn.

Early on a Saturday morning, I begrudgingly got out of bed, dressed and filled a travel mug with coffee to start my trip. I knew the basic route from Googling it – no major highways, just up 41 to 43, then 10 and finally 51 North most of the rest of the way – but my GPS told me where to go, which allowed me to focus on the scenery. For a long time, I focused on the gray rippling of Lake Michigan until I got past Milwaukee. Then the road opened up a bit and there were fewer sights to see. My mind wandered.

I thought about how I hadn't seen my father for four years before he died, and hadn't spoken to him for almost as long, save for the times when he picked up the phone when I called home to talk to another family member. Those conversations – terse and brief – represented the sum total of my relationship with the man. Even if the situation had been different, though, and we'd had something approaching a typical father-son relationship, I'm not sure Dad would've said much more to me. He was known to the people in his life – his coworkers, people at church, neighbors – as a quiet man, but nobody ever mistook it for meekness. There was intensity in his eyes, like there was something inside of him and he had to concentrate so hard just to keep it from exploding.

The hum of the road made me sleepy, so I opened the window, which was probably a good idea on long drives because of the hole in my muffler that leaked exhaust into the car. I drove past Appleton and thought about the house I grew up in and how I'd moved out of that house when I was 18 and never came back, at least not until my father dropped dead on the kitchen floor in that house and I had to clean up after him.

I'd been asked many times by people close to me – friends, girlfriends, even Mom – about what happened between my father and me. There was no marker in our history

with my father that warranted the end of our relationship. I've met other people who have crappy relationships with their parents, and most of them had some seminal moment when they knew it was over between them. For me, I suppose I just figured that if he didn't want to talk to me, I didn't need to talk to him. The longer it went without us talking, the easier it was. Most people didn't buy that explanation, as if they couldn't believe that it was that simple. My explanation, every time, was the same question: "If someone had nothing to say to you, would you keep talking to them?" Besides, people were going to believe what they wanted to believe about our relationship. Either they thought that it was my fault or his, but I didn't see or feel any fault, except in maybe a lack of effort on his part to establish a relationship between us. He was the adult. He should've been the bigger man.

Those questions always revealed more about the person asking them than they did about my relationship with Dad. Regardless, there were times when I *did* feel guilty, wondering if what I was doing was right. An unspoken code exists that says we should love our families and stay in touch with them just because they are our families. It might as well be the 11<sup>th</sup> Commandment: Thou shalt stay in touch with your family. When I really thought about it, though, I came to a different conclusion. I decided that I shouldn't feel any guilt, because I was taking the ethically higher ground. To pretend there was something there, and to perpetuate that myth, would be a continuous falsehood. It would be the lie that both of us could see and neither would admit. Wasn't it better to just accept the truth that there was nothing between us? I gained nothing by maintaining a relationship with my father. I didn't need him, and he certainly didn't need me. Conversely, I lost

nothing, either. The relationship was vapor – run your hand through it and you can feel it, but then there’s nothing there. That was my truth, at least. His might have been different, but he never told me.

Whatever other people believed, it didn’t change our relationship. We were still “estranged,” a word I always thought inappropriate. To me, it meant there was something there in the first place, some presence to a relationship. It meant changing that vapor to miasma. I had no reason to hate him, but I had no reason to like him, either. I could see no such relationship. We shared two things, DNA and proximity, and nothing else.

So, when other kids were being dropped off at college, their mothers doting on them and their fathers shaking their hands goodbye, I sat alone on an unmade bed. The summers were hard those first few years, when everyone else went home to their parent’s house and hung out with their old high school friends, but I made it by taking summer classes during the day and working as a bar back at night. Because of the extra summer classes, I graduated in three years, before I could even drink legally. I was alone then, and still was alone, single and living in Chicago, where I moved after because it was the closest big city and it seemed a world away from small-town Wisconsin. Or, at least, what I thought was small-town Wisconsin.

Driving through it, I realized I knew very little about what it was like to live in Wisconsin. I’d never had the chance to see the northern portion of the state, having not been back much since college. Once I got past Appleton, it started to get more and more rural. It was desolate, save for little pockets of houses alongside the highway. Finally, I arrived in Lac du Flambeau. Every house was a ranch, most with at least one pickup truck



parked in stone driveways. I passed the Lake of the Torches casino in town, where many of the town's 3,000 residents work. There were a few stop signs, but no stoplights, and the roads were so worn down from snowplows and age that they no longer had a center stripe. I just guessed at where my half of the road started.

As I drove through town, I made note of the places I might need to pick up food and supplies, just in case. Then I made my way 10 miles north on Old Pine Road, until the GPS' pretty British voice said, "You've arrived at your destination." There was nothing in sight. I was in the middle of the road, with no cabin, not even another road or driveway. At first I was annoyed, but then I wondered if the cabin had been torn down, or even worse, if my father had fabricated the lodge and instead was off doing who knows what. A car sped around me on the left and honked its horn, rousing me from a daydream about my father having another family somewhere else in the state. I pulled the car off to the side of the road and walked along the tree line, hoping to find some evidence of Dad's cabin. Finally, a couple hundred yards up the road, I found a pair of wrought-iron reflectors at the end of two tire-sized ruts heading into the woods.

The cabin was another half-mile into the woods, over a path that at times I wasn't certain my little two-wheel-drive Saturn could make. Finally, though, the trees cleared out and a circular gravel lot surrounded a tiny shack. Above the door, a piece of driftwood had "Iver" painted on it in yellow.

The door was unlocked, so I twisted it and stepped in. The smell – musty, almost pungent – hit me first. It instantly reminded me of my father, the way he smelled when he walked in the door after coming back from the cabin from the long weekends he would

go there, alone. He would tromp into the back room of our house, toss his muddy boots onto the shoe rack and walk right past us, sitting at the kitchen table, and hardly say a word. On the rare occasion either my brother or I would venture to ask him how his trip was or what he had done while he was there, he would mumble, “Okay,” or, “Stuff.”

Now, standing here in his cabin, I understood why he had little to say. There wasn't much to the place. It wasn't more than 400 square feet – a single room with walls, really – with knotty pine floors. I could see lighter spots where the floor had rotted out and my father had replaced it. A large cast-iron wood stove dominated the center of the cabin, with its chimney reaching up all the way to the peak of the roof. Next to the stove was an old rocking chair, wood with varnish so dark it looked black with gold trimmed etched in curly-cue patterns near where a head would rest. A metal cot, smaller than a twin-sized bed, sat tucked into a corner underneath one of the four windows.

I dropped my bag on the bed and turned toward the kitchen area. A white basin sink was next to a mini-fridge, its plug resting on top, both next to a four-foot by four-foot kitchen island with a top that looked like an oversized cutting board. A few wrought iron pans and some worn copper-bottomed pots hung from the sides of the island. On one side of the cupboard above the sink, there were non-perishables – canned corn, peas, pears and beans, an old-fashioned cardboard cylinder container of Quaker Oats. The other side was filled to nearly overflowing with Hormel chili – enough to feed a single man for several months. The plates in another section of the cupboards were perfectly arranged: four plates, four bowls, four glasses; the top one of each was scratched up and used, the other three pristine, unscathed.

I only had a Snickers bar and a Diet Coke on the drive up, so I was starving. I had passed a pizza shop in town that I could head back to, but I was tired and didn't feel like driving 40 minutes round-trip. Plus, it was freezing inside the cabin, so I figured I could warm the place up with a fire while I cooked myself some dinner. The "Best By" date on the chili was three years prior, but I assured myself that the tin was sealed, and at the very least cooking it on a stove would kill off any germs.

A pot of chili with a side of corn as my dinner, I grabbed a green military-issue blanket from a pile next to the bed and made myself comfortable in the rocking chair. Through the window, I could see the mid-afternoon sun slowly laying its head down on the horizon. I watched dust particles float through the sunbeams that came in. As I ate, I couldn't help but think that Dad probably sat in this exact same spot, doing the same thing I was doing right now. I pictured him staring ahead into space like he sometimes did when Mom would host dinner parties or the family would get together for Thanksgiving.

When I finished my dinner, I was warm and full. I looked around the lodge, thinking that I had a few hours of daylight left to start packing some things up, and wondering if anyone in town would want anything that didn't fit in my car. For a brief moment, I looked at the wood stove in the center of the room and the hard, old wood cabin surrounding me and I thought of how easy it would be for an "accident" to happen that would leave the place in ashes. It would be so simple – no cleanup, no sale, just insurance money and I could wipe my hands clean of it all. Then two images entered my thoughts: a fire engulfing the woods and any other cabins in the area along with it, and an insurance investigator knocking on my door. Neither scenario was one I wanted to deal with.

I scanned the room, until my eyes settled on a topography map tacked to the wall above the cot, still perfectly aligned with the seams on the wall. My eyes lowered to the cot, and with a full stomach and the warmth of the fire at my back, I decided that I could get to work after a nap.

Here I was, lying on a cot in a cabin my dead father owned and had never shared with us, in the middle of Wisconsin, above a town so small that I'm not sure I ever knew the name of it growing up. I thought about Dad and his strange relationship to this cabin. The cabin was just another mystery to us, one of many my father held closely. I wondered how many nights my father was here in this same spot, and if he thought about us when he was up here. I always had the impression when I was a kid that when he left he never thought about us, as if we were out of sight and out of mind.

Lying there, I realized that I never would know the answer to that question. It would become yet another one of my father's innumerable, boundless, inexplicable mysteries. It always seemed as if he was hiding some great big secret from us, like he knew the answer to life and was sworn to secrecy. When my brother or I had a question or a problem, we went to Mom, but any question to her about Dad was met with, "That's just how he is." My image of my father is of a stoic figure, sitting alone in a packed room, only speaking when spoken to. Even then, questions were met, after several moments of deliberative thought, with succinct answers; Dad never quibbled with his words, when he used them. He often did not. When he did, he was so proper. He called our mother Susanne, even though most everyone else called her Sue, even to us. It was never, "Listen to your mother," but instead, "Susanne said so, and you will obey her." Even that much

speaking was infrequent. Mostly, when Mom tried to get us to get in line and we wouldn't cooperate, a simple stern look from Dad would be enough to shut up either of us.

I remembered how, as a senior in high school, I struggled all year to make passing grades in physics – a field in which my father had his doctorate – and yet not once that year did he offer to help me. Years later, I asked Mom about it, about why he never offered to help. She said, “You never asked.” I was 17 and my father had never before offered me help. I didn't know *asking* was an option.

Yet I remembered seeing my father and admiring him for his dogged determination, despite the chasm between us. It was not uncommon to look out the picture window in our living room and see Dad staring at some project; not only was he trying to figure out an answer to a problem, he was trying to figure out fifteen, twenty, a hundred answers, only then to decide which solution was the “best” solution, the one which would cost the least, last the longest, require the least amount of physical exertion. Inevitably, he would find the best answer. Usually, the thinking lasted far longer than the solution.

As I got older, it got harder to understand just how he got to be the way he was. His example for his behavior was probably his father, but that didn't make sense, because Grandpa was a gregarious man, or at least that's what I'd been told. Grandpa died suddenly, when I was three, before I ever got to know him. I only have one memory of him, playing whiffle ball with him in a backyard somewhere the summer before he died, a memory that I'm not even sure is real because I was so, so young and I could have just made it up. The stories I've heard about him are full of smiles and laughs and admiration. He taught, and seemingly taught well -- a yellowed newspaper article tacked to Grand-

ma's refrigerator announcing an award he won tells me so -- and he volunteered his time and enjoyed it. In every picture I've seen of him, he connects with the viewer, as if he's staring through the camera lens, right at the person on the other side, and his smile fills his face, so wide it forces his cheeks to dimple, the same dimples he gave me, maybe the only thing he gave me. I'm not sure where Dad got his stony demeanor. I'm nothing like my father, so it's possible Dad was nothing like his father. It's as if I've had two generations before me and only dimples, blue eyes and ashes to show for it. They're gone and I've no way of wringing anything out of them. Now that I'm an adult and I have the ability to understand how to ask for what I need, I can't do it; my opportunity and my ability ran converse and I didn't notice the moment the paths crossed. I still can't tell when that moment had happened.

I woke up in the morning confused, not recognizing the oak-beamed ceiling above me and wondering why the sun was out again, even though it was setting when I'd fallen asleep. I realized I had slept through the whole night. It wasn't until I sat up, my back aching from a metal bar in the cot, that I could tell where I was. My first thought once I was fully awake was that I wanted a cup of coffee, but I remembered that I didn't see any coffee in the cupboard. I figured this was as good a time as any to head into town and pick up some supplies.

I found a general store on Main Street, replete with the vertical wood sign hanging out front declaring it to be "Harry's General Store." A row of rocking chairs lined up next to a ceiling-high stack of firewood for sale. Inside, the store offered canvas bags, instead of the plastic baskets like at the grocery stores at home. Five rows of shelves, many most

empty, made up the entirety of the store. I wandered up and down the rows, picking up things I thought I needed: Coffee, peanut butter and cereal, all under a thin layer of dust spread. Underneath an eight-foot wide 1986 Green Bay Packers schedule banner, faded and fraying at the edges, I opened the cooler and grabbed a six-pack of beer.

No one was manning the cash register, so I dinged a shiny silver service bell. From the back of the store, I heard movement. A voice came from behind me.

“What’s your name?”

A white-haired man, clearly tall at one time but now stooped a bit, shuffled his way up front. I assumed this to be Harry. He reached the front and I set my bags on the counter in front of him. He began to pull things out of the bags and add up their prices on an old calculator.

“Joshua Iver.”

“Rayford’s boy?”

“Yeah, he is ... was ... my Dad. He passed six months ago. You knew him?”

“I’m sorry to hear that, son. Guess we kind of lost touch with him,” Harry said, shaking his head. “Whenever your dad was in the area, he would come down and sit with some of us men in town in those rocking chairs out front. We’d talk for hours out there.”

I scoffed. “That doesn’t sound like my dad. He was a pretty quiet guy.”

“He was like that at first with me, too. Used to stop by once every time he came up, but mostly he kept to himself.”

“So what changed?”

“Started coming more often,” Harry said, and then he quietly laughed. “Funny

thing, he used to get the same thing every time: about a dozen cans of Hormel chili. I even asked him once how many people he had staying out at that cabin of his, but he said it was just him. After a while, I got the sense that he was lonely out there in that little shack, all by himself. So I asked him one day to come by for lunch, and introduced him to a few of the guys. We sit out front there, when it's not too cold, and talk about things. Typical stuff: sports, hunting, families."

I couldn't hide my disbelief. A man who just lets his relationship with his son just fade away didn't seem to me the kind of guy who would sit out in rocking chairs and shoot the breeze. "He was part of the conversation? I mean, he talked to you all?"

"You seemed surprised." He grabbed the last of my items and put it in a paper grocery bag.

"He wasn't like that around us."

"Well, it took a while around us, too, but then he broke out of his shell."

Harry might as well have been describing a stranger. I thought about telling him about our relationship, how I hadn't really spoken with him for 13 years. Harry clearly liked my father, though, and I didn't see any reason to compromise that now that Dad was gone. At least someone had a good memory of him, I figured. I paid for my groceries and headed for the door. Before I got there, Harry stopped me.

"You know, your father always said good things about you. Said you were a smart kid, that he was real proud of you. You have a good day, now."

I stopped and looked back at Harry, frozen for a second. "You as well," I mumbled, shuffling into the parking lot.



During the drive back to the cabin, and for several hours afterward, Harry's words kept ringing in my ears. "... *he was real proud of you.*" I tried, but couldn't remember Dad ever saying to me, "I'm proud of you." I couldn't remember anything that would even give an indication of that. Not after any of the athletic awards I won, not on the days I graduated from high school, and definitely not after we stopped talking, when I graduated college, or when I got offered my first job.

My emotions were all over the place. I felt at first that I should be happy that Dad said he was proud of me. The urge to please him, to make him proud of me, was always underneath the surface in me, often unrecognized but unmistakably there. Then there were so many questions. Was Harry telling the truth, or was he just being polite because he knew my father died? Did Dad really say that about me? Why did I have to travel five hours out of the way *after* he died to find this out? Why didn't he ever tell me? The more unanswered questions, the angrier I got.

I paced the cabin in angry energy, but the tiny space felt like it was closing in on me. After running into the kitchen table, I decided to go for a walk to burn off the anxiousness and clear my head. Outside, I zipped up my coat to my chin and pulled my wool hat down low over my ears and chose a direction. The snow on the ground was high enough that it eclipsed my boots, making it difficult to walk. After 20 minutes, though, I reached the lake, and a path where the snow was tamped down ran alongside it.

I walked for more than an hour, so far that at one point I panicked, worried that I had gone too far out to make it back and that I would be found weeks later, frozen in a fetal position. Everywhere I looked, everything looked the same: frozen water surrounded

by pristine white. The trees all formed the same pattern, with evergreens splitting up the other trees, so weighed down from the heavy snow that their branches nearly tipped the ground. If I were looking at a picture of it, instead of feeling the cold air on my running nose, it would look like the trees were covered in marshmallow coating.

During the trek back, I could feel the muscles in my legs jump from the combination of cold and inactivity. Too tired to be angry anymore, I thought about Dad, about what he saw in me that I didn't see in him and what connected us and what pushed us apart. I thought about the time he spent an entire afternoon explaining how an alternator in a car worked, even going so far as to take me to a used car part junkyard to pull one out and install it in our old Chevy station wagon. To this day, whenever I drive a car I think about the alternator. It's about the only part of a car I understand. Then I thought about the time that, in a fit of childish anger, I flung a yellow plastic whiffle ball bat in his direction. Although it landed harmlessly at his feet, the act of rebellion ignited his flash anger and he picked it up, approached me, frozen in fear, and hit me repeatedly across the backside with it until the plastic bat bent in half and hung impotently from his hand. He and I didn't look each other in the eye for days afterward.

When I finally trudged the last few steps through foot-high snow to the door of the cabin, my boots had soaked through and my feet felt as if they were merely disconnected instruments on which I balanced myself. I was exhausted. Inside the door, I again eyed the cot in the corner, reasoning that I could waste another few hours with a nap. I ripped off my jacket and tossed it toward the coat rack, and then flopped on the bed. I lay there, my mind still working, unable to sleep. I kept trying to think of my father, sitting

with Harry and other men on the front porch of the general store, chatting about hunting and the Packers.

I wondered if my father used up all his social skills during the few weeks a year he was at the cabin. Was Harry the only one he was being so open to? I pictured Dad, puffing away at a cigar at a card table, laughing and carousing with several other men, drinking and telling dirty jokes. Then I saw him in his truck on the way home, slowly winding himself down, pulling the zipper shut on his emotions, yanking it those last few inches as he pulled into the driveway of our house.

Then, staring up at the dark wood of the ceiling, past which lay a heaven in which I wondered if my father was resting, one more question came to me: What was it about Harry that made my father open up? Just as soon as the question came, the answer came: Harry had asked. I was back in the store, standing in front of Harry when he said, “I asked him one day to come by for lunch.”

I’d spent more than half my life wondering why my father never spoke to me. I wrote him off for that same reason, never making an effort to ask him, about anything. I just fed off his silence, used it to feed my own resentment. The more I fed it, the more it grew, the more it became my father’s fault for the rift in our relationship, and ultimately the end of it. In truth, there was far more of him in me that I ever wanted to admit. I remember, before I moved out for good, looking at Dad and feeling this pull, starting in the center of my stomach and coming up through my lungs, that I could only interpret as a desire to reach out and connect with him. There were never any words, though, just the pull, because something always got in the way. It was an empty bow, its string taut

and snapping forward, but no arrow slicing through the awkward air toward its intended target. Whether shyness or embarrassment or another reason, the words never, ever came.

And if that feeling was in me, it could've been in Dad, too. After years of hoping that I wouldn't turn out like him, it no longer was so crazy to think I had. I remembered times at parties when someone came up to me and started asking me questions, how unburdened that made me feel, because I didn't have to come up with that opening salvo and risk saying something stupid. Instead, I could just answer the questions until I felt comfortable enough to carry on. With Harry and my father, that's what had happened: Harry had asked, and it gave my father the opening he needed.

I never gave Dad that opening. I never asked him. I could point the finger at him for not being more open when I was a kid, but once I grew up and moved out and became an adult, I shared as much responsibility as he did. I might have changed the last 13 years if I had just once picked up the phone and called him, opening the lines between us. It would've been as simple as asking, "Hey Dad, what's going on with you these days?" Or even, "My car's busted. Can you help?" I didn't do that, and I shared the culpability while he was alive. Now that he's gone, I bear that burden alone, and it was heavier then because I had let it lay beside me for so long.

I packed up the few things I'd brought and drove home that afternoon, stopping several times because my mind was racing. I missed the father that I had. I missed the father that I never got to meet. I was mourning the father that he never was, never would be. It was decades of missing out on a father who could've been there, a father who I'd tossed aside.

During that drive, I decided not to sell the cabin. Looking at it with new eyes, I saw it as the place where my father finally felt comfortable enough to open up. I thought perhaps I, too, could learn how to do the same thing. And when I just couldn't face that feeling of laying my soul bare, when my sheath was out of arrows, I could go there and be quiet.

## GIVEN THE CHANCE

I dreaded sitting in a car with my father. The hum of the wheels on the pavement blended with Garrison Keillor's dulcet voice on NPR filled the cabin of Dad's truck, but we both were silent. He focused on the road, hands on the wheel at 10 and 2, as if we were driving through a storm that required great amounts of concentration. Outside, the August sun slowly turned the grass on the undulating hills of upstate New York from green to brown. Every few miles, impossibly green exit signs interrupted the burnt grass. It reminded me how much longer I was stuck in the cabin of the truck. Exit 35, Tinker Tavern Road. Forty-five more miles, 50 more minutes. Exit 42, Kellogg Hill. Ten more miles, 15 more minutes.

I leaned my head on the window and looked into the huge side mirror on the truck, the reflection of the huge red vehicle staring back at me, red the color of sports cars, the color of fast, but in the mirror I saw the dotted yellow line fade slowly behind us. As the sun dipped down below the tint at the top of the windshield, Dad squinted and flipped down the flimsy clip-on sunglasses affixed to his glasses. The truck's cheap plastic vents blew warm air in my face. It was stifling in the cabin, but Dad refused to run the air-conditioning or open the windows because he claimed both cut down on the truck's gas mileage. As he stared ahead, I glanced over at him and noticed him perspiring, causing his glasses to slip down his nose, revealing an angry red indent caused by years of

thick glasses resting in the same spot.

We hadn't said a word to each other for almost an hour, not since I had asked him why he was so adamantly against my older brother Joe and his wife adopting a child. At 37, Joe's wife Rebecca was nearly eight years his senior. After three years of marriage, they finally decided they wanted children. But then her doctors warned that Rebecca's severe Crohn's disease – and the steady diet of prednisone and Remicade to treat it – combined with her age made pregnancy risky. Rebecca talked it over with her doctors and even tried to wean off her medications, going eight weeks without a treatment, but she became so ill that she lost eight pounds in less than a week. Joe and Rebecca realized that the only way they would have children was if they adopted. But adoption cost money – tens of thousands of dollars they didn't have. Their only affordable option was the foster system, which meant wading through a long and tedious process of bureaucracy. But it was their only option, so they went to orientations, filed applications, had their backgrounds checked, sat through hours of training sessions, opened their home for inspections. And then they waited for a phone call telling them that they could pick up a child – not *their* child, yet, but a foster child who could become their child in six months, maybe a year. Or never, if the court ruled the biological parents were fit to raise the child.

So, after 18 months of unrelenting effort to convince the state that they were fit to care for a child, it was particularly upsetting to Joe and Rebecca when Dad sat on the tan faux-leather couch that he had passed on to them and told them they were making a mistake. It would have been one thing if Dad had just cautioned them about the risks involved; he was experienced with the adoption process and might be able to offer some

insight that Joe and Rebecca might have overlooked. That wasn't what happened, though. Instead, from what Joe told me, Dad spent nearly an hour disparaging their decision. In the end, Joe said that he flat-out said that they were making the wrong decision.

I needed to know why. Maybe it was because I wanted to hear the words that Dad said to them that made me curious. Or maybe it was because I couldn't believe that a man who had adopted two boys could be so callous about one of his children adopting. Whatever the reason, it was out of character for me to be so frank with him. But when I looked over at him, staring ahead at the road, he seemed so contented, like he had things figured out in his life. His face, too smooth for a 56 year old, didn't bear the anxiety that I'm sure Joe and Rebecca felt. His hands loosely gripped the steering wheel.

"Why don't you want Joe and Rebecca to adopt?"

He paused before answering. He always did that, as if he had long ago learned his lesson not to blurt out answers and now carefully considered every word that came out of his mouth. It was maddening, particularly because when he contemplated his answer he would place his lower lip over his upper lip like a pouting child, but also because it always made me feel as if he was thinking of the "right" answer to a question, not his true reaction.

"I think ... ." He tilted his head, as if he had only thought of the first two words of his answer. "... it's risky. You never know what you're going to get."

"Isn't that true of any adoption? Or, for that matter, any child?"

He inhaled, as if he were breathing in the answer. "Yes, but ..."

I didn't let him finish. "What about when you decided to adopt Joe and me?"



“What about it?”

“You took that risk.”

“Sort of. I left it up to your mother whether or not we had kids. I was okay either way.” He propped his left elbow up against where the window meets the black molded plastic of the door, leaning away from me as if he wanted to distance himself. “She decided she did -- want kids, that is -- so we adopted. But I could’ve pictured a life of just her and I.”

I don’t know what he meant by his answer. I couldn’t see it any other way than him saying he didn’t want me. That was the opposite of everything Mom and Dad had told us when we were kids. They were so worried after they told us we were adopted that we would feel abandoned that they constantly were telling us how happy they were that we were their children. It almost became comical.

This, though, was a departure from their overbearing assurances that we were wanted. I wanted to scream at my father for being so cavalier, but whatever words came out of my mouth would seem so inconsequential compared to what he had just said. Then came the faint odor of the lake, like when worms come out on the sidewalks after a rain. We would be there soon, and there was no sense in starting a conversation that would just end abruptly once we arrived.

Within minutes, Dad yanked the wheel into the short driveway in front of the garage, the wheels crunching gravel. I yanked the door handle open and jumped out, still unsettled. I left my bag in the back of the truck, instead hopping up the back steps of my parents’ grey cobweb-covered cottage. In the door I went, through the back storage area

and into the main room of the cottage.

The cottage -- all 600 square feet of it -- could better be described as a shack, with two tiny bedrooms and a screened in porch attached to the side that faced the lake. It smelled like damp, wet wood that had been aged 50 years. Even though my parents had bought it less than a decade ago, everything in the house came from the previous owners. The place seemed like someone on a strict budget had asked a decorator to hit up all the yard sales in the area and make it look “rustic.” The floor featured pea-soup green indoor-outdoor carpeting was darker in high-traffic areas, and a faded and cracking map of Lake Ontario on the fake wood-paneled walls, next to the crumbling painting of geese. I’m sure if we ever took the painting down, the wall beneath them would be at least 10 shades lighter.

Mom came in from the front porch, arms out wide, expecting a hug. She spent most of the summers up at the cottage, so I hadn’t had a chance to see her since I’d gotten home from school for the summer a few weeks earlier.

She had a broad, toothy smile, but whenever Mom smiled she squinted her eyes as if she was in pain. It was like her mouth was trying to convince the rest of her face that she was happy. When I hugged her, I rested my chin on the top of her head and she squeezed her arms around my ribs. I felt wanted again.

“How’s one of my two favorite sons?”

I yanked open the ancient refrigerator, grabbing a bottle of Corona and a wedge of lime from a baggy. Every time I came to the cottage after I turned 21, Mom had bought a 12 pack of Corona and put it in the fridge with a plastic baggy with exactly 12 slices

of lime. On my birthday dinner a few months earlier, I'd ordered a Corona with lime and Mom had thought it was some sort of novelty. I didn't have the heart to tell her that I didn't really like Corona, but that it was the only non-crappy beer on the menu that night.

I popped open the bottle and squeezed in the lime. I walked out of the cottage to the end of the dock, took my shoes off and sat down, dangling my bare feet in the water.

###

Joe finally arrived in the mid-afternoon, tired from a long flight and drive from the airport, and lied down for a nap. A few hours later, after dinner, Joe and I stood next to each other in the kitchen. Joe washed barbecue sauce off plastic plates, then handed them to me to dry. Mom and Dad sat in the adjoining living room. Mom knitted pot holders, the white yarn coming out of her canvas knitting bag in taut lines that crossed over and over until they knotted. Dad scratched answers with a worn, wooden pencil in a three-day old crossword puzzle in the *Watertown Daily Times*.

The phone rang, its bleating startling the four of us. It was unusual to get a phone call at the cottage. Mom did what she did in each of the few times I can remember the phone ringing at the cottage. She looked at each of us in succession and asked, "Are you expecting a call?" In unison, we all shook our head. The phone rang a second, then third, then fourth time before I finally lifted it off the receiver.

As I was saying hello, Mom mouthed, "Who is it?"

I mouthed, "Lilly."

Lilly and I had been together going on two years, since meeting in an intro to political science class our sophomore year. Her voice sounded thin and tinny through the telephone, belying the assuredness that I detected in her when we first met; it was the thing that most attracted me to her. Whenever we talked on the phone, I always pictured hugging her. She was just tall enough that the top of her head was right below my chin, and I would always kiss her on the forehead and breathe deeply, smelling the vanilla of her shampoo. Even when we were apart, I could smell the vanilla, a feeling that I sometimes interpreted as love. Now that we were going into our senior years, I felt like our relationship might be getting a bit more serious. But I wasn't prepared for just how serious it might be.

"I'm late," she said.

"Late for what?"

"Late, Nick. You know, late?"

The words hit me slowly, like they were delayed over the 120 miles of telephone wires between us. I didn't say anything for a few moments.

Lilly cut into my stupor. "Not the reaction I was going for."

I looked up, and Mom, Dad and Joe were all staring at me. I had to let Lilly know that I couldn't talk bluntly with them in the room. "Yeah, Joe and I were just finishing up the dishes and Mom and Dad are here, too."

"So you can't talk?"

"No."

"Well, I'm three days late."

I thought about some of the stories I'd heard from my friends, who'd had girlfriends that were weeks late. "That's not that bad."

"Nick, I'm *never* late," Lilly said, the volume and tone of her voice raising simultaneously desperation overtaking her voice. "Plus, you remember what happened last time."

The last time we saw each other, it was the last night of spring semester. A few friends had stuck around after finals were done to party without having to answer to our parents for the last time until the fall. I woke up the next morning in my barren dorm room, boxes and suitcase packed into a corner waiting for Dad to load them into the Suburban for the trip home, with Lilly beside me in the spartan metal-framed twin bed. I had little recollection of the night before. It occurred to me that I might have gotten my girlfriend pregnant during sex that I hardly remembered, if at all.

"That was so stupid, Nick. I can't believe you didn't use protection."

I felt a quick flash of anger. I thought to say, "It wasn't just me," but I looked up at Mom and Dad. By that point, they had returned to their knitting and crossword, but I couldn't snap at Lilly without them noticing.

"What are we going to do, Nick?"

I could tell she was angry, that she just wanted someone to direct it at, but I wasn't ready to accept what was happening. Early on in our relationship – that awkward part of many college relationships, after we'd started sleeping together but not before we really knew all that much about each other -- Lilly had told me that she'd had an abortion before she met me, that she'd never do it again, that she'd forever be traumatized by it. I didn't

think anything of it when she told me, because I'd never had unprotected sex before I met her and didn't anticipate starting with her. But now I lamented how cocksure I'd been, because it was clear that if Lilly were pregnant, I wouldn't be any part of any decision. There wouldn't even *be* a decision.

Behind me, I heard knitting needles stop clacking together, and Mom cleared her throat. I looked over at her, and she tapped her watch, reminding me that the phone call was costing them by the minute. I needed to wrap it up before Dad came over and hung up the phone for me, but without making Lilly feel like I was pushing her away.

"Can't you go get something to find out?"

"Yeah, but I don't think I can get to the store until at least tomorrow morning. Mom's got company over tonight and she expects me to eat dinner with them, and I just can't take off right after we're done."

"It'll be okay," I said, trying to convince myself just as much as Lilly.

"You're right," she said, with a flippancy that I interpreted as resignation. "Let's just wait to find out."

With Mom using her hand to mimic hanging up a phone, we said our goodbyes. Saturday never felt so far away.

###

Later that night, after Mom and Dad had gone to bed, Joe and I sat on the stone beach next to a fire we had made. As the fire faded into embers, Joe and I poked sticks

into the glowing orange pit while sipping bottles of beer. I stared at the fire intently, until I could see the flames even when I looked away, hoping that maybe I could just forget about what Lilly had told me. It wasn't working, so I turned to Joe. "I asked Dad on the ride up why he was so against you adopting."

"Yeah? What'd he say?"

The pit would sizzle every so often, and Joe kept tossing in small kindling, watching it start to brown and then envelop in flame. "Basically, he said he was afraid you'd get a dud."

"A 'dud?'" Joe's voice was a mixture of incredulity and mocking; "Dud" is not a term our father would use.

"Obviously, those weren't his exact words, but that was the gist of it."

Joe and I sat for a few moments, not looking at each other. The near-silent night was interrupted intermittently by splashes, fish jumping out of the lake into the darkness, the only other evidence of them wavy ripples on the moonlit reflection on the water. The quiet stretched on long enough that when Joe finally said something, it startled me.

"Wonder which one of us is the dud." Joe tossed another stick into the fire pit. The orange flames licked higher for a moment as they consumed the stick, illuminating Joe's face and his pursed lips.

"Why would you think that?"

"It's got to be one of us. Where else would he get that idea? I mean, no one else we know is adopted. It has to be one of us."

"I think it might be me soon," I said.

“What makes you think that, Nick?”

I paused, considering whether to tell him about Lilly. On the one hand, it would be a relief for someone else to know. On the other, it would be selfish and unfair of me to unburden myself when my brother was so close to something so major in his life. “Just a feeling, I guess.”

“I doubt it. You’re about to graduate; that internship you scored last summer will probably help you get a good job after that. You’ve got nothing but potential. You’re like a high draft pick -- nothing but upside. You haven’t done anything to screw that up. Meanwhile, I’m trying to adopt a child that Dad thinks will be a serial killer some day.”

I had nothing to say to that. It was true. Dad didn’t think what Joe was doing was a good idea. Maybe he didn’t think the kid would become a “serial killer,” but he didn’t hide his displeasure at all.

Joe and I just sat there for a few minutes, not saying anything to each other. Occasionally, I picked up a rock from the beach and tossed it into the lake, just to hear the “kerplunk” it would make when it hit the water. Finally, Joe stood up and said he was going to bed. As he turned to head back to the cottage, I stopped him.

“It probably doesn’t mean much, but I think it’s awesome what you’re doing.”

“That actually means a lot,” Joe said, as he turned toward the cottage and said good night over his shoulder. I stayed out by the fire until it was burned out.

###



The next morning, the sound of Dad mowing the lawn and Joe using the weed-whacker around the trees on the shoreline woke me up. My body ached from the awkward position I'd slept in on the futon on the porch. I flipped over on my back and stared at the white drop ceiling with brown amoeba-shaped stains in the corners. For a brief moment, Lilly's phone call didn't exist; I wasn't yet awake enough to remember clearly the night before. But then it was there – the phone call, Lilly's voice repeating "I'm *never* late" – and anxiety swept over me as if it were the waves I could hear lapping at the shore outside.

I thought about what I would do if Lilly really were pregnant. Despite the sun beating through the windows onto my skin, a chill ran through my body. What *would* I do? I had no answers, only more questions. Would I stay in school? Would Lilly and I move in together? Where would we live? Would we get married? What would her Mom say? What would my parents do? How would I pay for this kid?

I knew I'd need to get a job, but without a college degree my options for jobs that would pay well enough to support a kid were limited. Then I remembered that I had flirted with the idea of becoming a Marine in my senior year of high school. My grandfather on Mom's side was a proud Marine who I had idolized before he died when I was 13. He played drums in the Marine band and had pictures of him in his crisp white uniform, sitting stock straight behind a Pearl kit surrounded by 50 other men who seemed so unblemished. Grandpa once gave me a book as a boy titled, "Once a Marine, Always a Marine," and I read it at least four times, cover to cover, imagining that one day I too would wear that pristine dress uniform and stand tall.

That dream extended deep into high school, and in January of my senior year, a recruiter sat in our living room and handed me the paperwork to fill out that would have sent me to boot camp two weeks after I graduated. Dad was at work and Mom was out running errands. The recruiter took the paperwork with my signature on it and was about to shake my hand and welcome me to the Marines until he checked my birthdate on the form. My 18<sup>th</sup> birthday was not for another four months, saving me from boot camp. By the time my birthday rolled around, my parents had convinced me that college was a better option.

But now, the Marines seemed almost appealing. With me entering my senior year, I'd begun to notice the pressure building to decide what to do after I graduated. I'd seen it in older friends who had already graduated. The questions ramped up, like *What are you going to do when you finish school?* or *What field are you looking for a job in?* or *Where are you going for graduate school?* I had no answer for those questions, and now with the Lilly situation added into the calculation, it was even worse. At least in the Marines, there always would be someone telling me what to do, which in this time of uncertainty seemed sublime.

But it wasn't that easy. Even if I worked hard in the military, rose in the ranks and got a good job, I'd be forever defined by a mistake. Every time a family member asked how my job was going, they would know that I joined the military because I got my girlfriend pregnant. And then there were my family's expectations to consider; every person in my immediate family had at least a master's degree. My father had a Ph.D. His father, my grandfather, had a Ph.D. If I joined the Marines, I'd become the reverse of the Ameri-

can dream: I'd be the first person in my family *not* to graduate from college in three generations. I'd be a dropout. No amount of success in the Marines would change that.

# # #

As Dad and Joe finished up with the lawn, I got up and threw on a t-shirt and some torn jeans. Sitting around wasn't the best option for me, because I knew I would just stare at the phone, waiting for Lilly to call. Instead, I decided to try to keep myself busy while I waited to hear from her. Outside, Joe and Dad were discussing their next project, chopping up a tree down the shore that a storm had brought down a few weeks back. I went out and volunteered to help. Dad told me to grab our axe from its hook on the corrugated board in the garage, while he grabbed a small chainsaw from the back of his truck.

Dad, Joe and I walked down the shore, saying hello to the neighbors as we passed through their beachfronts to get to the downed tree. When we reached the tree, Dad gave us our instructions: he would cut the trunk into sections and we would split it with the axe, taking turns when we tired. We said little after that, with the chainsaw's noise overwhelming any attempt at conversation. Joe and I shared the axe, well older than both of us and misshapen from years of sharpening, taking turns splitting apart a tree that just a month ago stood solid.

While Joe took his turn swinging the axe, I sat down on a stump and watched my brother and father working together. Without the tree there anymore, we had no protec-

tion from the sun. Soon, our t-shirts and baseball caps were soaked through, and Dad and Joe threw their hats aside, dismissing them as useless. As the time wore on, I noticed that Joe and Dad shared a few distinctive mannerisms. When sweat started to run into their eyes, they both would grab the bottom hem of their t-shirt and pull it up, revealing their soft bellies, to wipe the perspiration away. Then when they tired, they would set their tool down and put both hands on their waist, as if they were children throwing a temper tantrum, minus the tantrum.

The realization made me think about all the things we shared. Even though we both were adopted, Joe and I exhibited a great many characteristics that came directly from Dad. When we concentrated, all three of us would unconsciously bite our tongues. Or when we pondered the answer to a question, we would flip our bottom lip over our top lip, like we were bulldogs with an under bite. We all absentmindedly would scratch the stubble on our chins with our left hands while we read.

But now I was different than the both of them for one key reason: choice. Joe wanted a child, decided with his wife that they both did, and went about adopting one. My father was a bit different. He could have been involved in a decision about children, but he abdicated that choice to Mom. Nonetheless, he still at one time had a choice in the matter.

Sitting on the stump with the noise drowning out Joe and Dad made it seem as if they were animated characters in front of me. I couldn't hear their grunts as they leaned into their work or the sound of Joe's glove sliding down the axe-handle on each swing, and then Mom showed up and gestured to Joe to follow her, and he left, handing the axe

to me. The soundless animation in front of me made me feel distant from Mom and Dad and Joe, further away than I'd ever felt before.

The distance reminded me of the conversation I'd had with Dad, and how far apart I'd felt from him when he said that he wasn't part of the choice to adopt me. It instantly angered me. I resented him for having a choice in whether he became a father or not, and it pissed me off that he had given up that choice. I had no choice. Whether I wanted to or not, if Lilly was pregnant, I would be a dad. I thought about how my child would look into my eyes, and somewhere in there, that baby would be able to see that I hadn't willingly entered into fatherhood, just like I could now see that in my father's eyes. I imagined the look on my father's face if he found out that Lilly was pregnant. His lips pursed, Dad seemed pained by disappointment, like a child trying to withstand a shot at the doctor's office. But maybe he also would give me a knowing look that said, "I know what it's like to have a child you didn't really want." Somehow, I knew that if Lilly and I had a baby now, the child would be aware that it had come about without intent, and it filled with me sadness and an anger that overwhelmed me.

So I grabbed the axe and used that anger. I threw my anger at each log, splitting them until there weren't any more to split. When I was done, I was so tired that the anger had abated, and all that was left was the tired, unwanted sadness.

###

Dad and I walked back down the shore after finishing with the tree, and I hoped

that when we got back I could lie down on the futon for a nap. I wished I could sleep and wake up knowing something for certain, instead of being stuck in this limbo between typical college kid and college dropout with a child out of wedlock.

But when we walked in the door, Joe and Mom were standing next to each other in the living room, smiling. Mom had come down the shore earlier to get Joe because Rebecca had been on the phone, calling to tell Joe the news: they had been approved as foster parents. It was the first big step toward them being able to adopt a child. Of course, there would be other hurdles along the way, but being approved meant that they would now work with a social worker to select a child that best fit with them.

For the next half-hour, Joe filled us in on the details of how the foster-to-adopt program worked. In effect, Joe and Rebecca would be standard foster parents for a year or more. According to Joe, many of the children in the foster-to-adopt program came from families where one or both of the parents had temporarily lost custody of the child because they'd been sent to jail. Dad's expression changed when Joe said that, and both Joe and I noticed. Joe didn't let it stop him, though. He said that after a certain period of time, one of three things would happen: the birth parents would regain custody, which meant Joe and Rebecca would have to return the child; the birth parents would sign away custody; or the state would rule the birth parents unfit and make the child a ward of the state, thus making the child eligible for adoption. Joe seemed to like their chances.

His enthusiasm would've been contagious, had I been in a different frame of mind. When Joe said, "I could be a dad soon!" I thought for a split-second, "Me too," and a wave of nausea overcame me.

Mom decided that we would go into town to celebrate that night. She picked town's only fancy restaurant, The Boat House, to get a big meal and congratulate Joe and Rebecca, in absentia. She called and made reservations for five o'clock, because my parents hated crowds, hated the screaming kids in the restaurant when it was packed, hated to wait for a table.

# # #

The Boat House was shaped like a miniature airplane hangar, like a circle cut in half and laid down on the ground. The ceilings were made of adjoining knotty pine planks, light in color and varnished to a shine. As one would expect with its name, the restaurant sat right on the water; patrons could pull their boats up to the dock outside and tie them down while eating. The place was empty when we got there, the waiters and waitresses just tying their crisp white aprons on as we were led to our table, a curved booth that sat only three. Mom, Dad and Joe crammed in to the leather seat, while the waitress pulled up a maroon fake-leather chair with brass rivets for me to sit on the outside of the table, alone. Dad ordered a round of drinks, pointing at each of us to let the waitress know what we wanted.

Joe held court at our table, talking about how excited he was about having a baby in their house. When our food came, I put my head down and ate without saying anything while Dad, Mom and Joe continued to talk about details, about preparing the house for life with a child. I wanted to find the energy and enthusiasm to celebrate with my broth-

er, but my situation sapped me of that ability. No matter how much my parents and Joe laughed and talked about Joe and Rebecca's future, all I could think about was my future and whether the phone at the cottage was ringing. We didn't have voicemail at the cottage, so there was no way to know if Lilly had called while we were away.

I excused myself to the restroom, hoping maybe to compose myself. In the bathroom, I ran my hands under the water and splashed some on my face, rubbed my eyes and then dried off. I stared back at myself in the mirror, wondering if I could be a good father. At that moment, I realized I had abandoned "if," and had begun to think with certainty that Lilly was pregnant.

The door opened behind me, and in the mirror I could see that it was Dad. I pretended to wash my hands, grabbed a paper towel to dry off and turned to exit. But my father stopped me before I could leave. It was clear that he was upset.

"I want to talk to you."

I was taken aback. My father was rarely this direct. Usually when he was angry with us, he would just squint his eyes and stare at us like he was trying to use ESP to will us into doing what he wanted. I tried to act casual.

"I don't know what's going on with you, but I expect you to start acting a little more excited for your brother."

"Sorry, I'm just tired."

"Well, at least tell him congratulations and show a little enthusiasm. We owe him that. This is a big moment in your brother's life."

I wanted to end the conversation. I didn't feel like getting into the reasons why I



was so unenthused. Another part of me, though, was angry with my father for his hypocrisy. He'd been criticizing Joe and Rebecca's decision to adopt through the foster system, and yet when they finally are about to get a child, Dad is acting as if this is the greatest news he's ever heard. To mollify him, I agreed with him and promised that I would be happier for Joe.

"Thank you. I'll see you out there."

When I got back to the table, I made more of an effort to be part of the conversation. Dad returned, and we started discussing the chances that Joe and Rebecca would ultimately be able to adopt the foster child. Joe explained that most times it was up to the biological parents, and whether they could get their lives together enough to earn back custody.

Mom shook her head. "I just can't imagine anything being more important to someone than his or her child," she said.

Joe said, "Yeah, I know, but we're in sort of a weird situation. We're almost hoping that the birth parents don't succeed. We're hoping they want something more than their child."

I raised my glass and called for a toast. "Here's to unwanted children," I said.

###

After dinner and dessert, after the check had been paid and it was time to go, I told Mom I was going to walk the two miles back to the cottage. She asked if I was okay,

and I told her that I just wanted to walk off my dinner. Mom, Dad and Joe packed into the truck and headed away, leaving me alone on the main strip of the town.

I walked through the small town, a grid of only 10 or so blocks each way, until I reached Ontario Street, a one-and-a-half mile strip that ran along the shore of the lake. A number of cottages, including ours, dotted the road in the last half-mile, but the first mile was empty. It was just the road, a strip of grass and the lake. Walking along the lake, you can see to Canada on a clear night, and when the breeze comes in to shore, the northern air always feels a bit chillier.

I wanted to walk to clear my head, but it was hard not to think about all that had happened in the previous two days. Dad revealed that he was absent from the decision to be a father, Lilly called to telling me I might a father myself and Joe got news that he, too, might be a dad soon. I wondered what Joe would say to his son when he was old to enough to tell that he'd been adopted, or what I would say to my child if Lilly were pregnant. I wondered if Joe would tell his son that they hoped his biological parents gave him up. I wondered if I ever would tell my kid the circumstances of his or her coming into the world.

Above all, I wondered what Joe and I would be like as fathers. I realized, as my steps fell in rhythm with the metronome of the lapping waves, that much of what we would be like as fathers would be modeled upon our father. I thought about what that would mean for the both us, or how much control we would have over the way we were as dads. I had always thought that each action, each decision, that Dad made was a conscious one. I thought he decided to act the way he did, but now I wasn't so sure. What his

father was like might have subconsciously made a difference. I remembered all the times I had done things that, had I thought about them, I wouldn't have done. And when I was done, I'd wondered why I'd done them. So, if it was true that what made me who I am was a series of conscious and subconscious decisions, it followed that's what made Dad who he was, too.

So, who was Dad, and what words would I use to describe him, I asked myself. I thought about the answer as my steps along the crumbling paved road carried me closer to him, and what I realized was this: he was there. If there were words to describe Dad, it was those: He was there.

I realized that whether Dad "wanted" us or not, he was there for us when we needed him. He may have not been the guy you call for advice or the person you consulted when you were disappointed because you didn't get the job you wanted, but in the physical sense, he showed up. When my Little League team needed a coach or the season would be cancelled, he volunteered even though he was putting in 60-hour weeks at the office. When my car broke down at college and I didn't have the money to fix it, he drove three hours on a Saturday morning to get there, bought all the parts I needed and spent six hours helping me put them in and get the car running, before driving another three hours home. He did what he knew how to help us in the ways he was capable of helping us.

Even more, he was there even when he disagreed with us. Like tonight, he celebrated with Joe when he found out that he and his wife might soon adopt, even though he was against it. He even made sure I supported my brother, too, even though I was distracted by something else.

If he were there for those things, he'd be there when I needed him. If I needed him, all I had to do was ask. It was my turn to realize that he gave what he could and what he knew to give, and he couldn't magically know what I needed. Yeah, he might be the type of guy you call when you're upset after a fight with your girlfriend, but maybe he was; I'd never called to figure out. I'd never given him the chance to be that dad. I wondered if I would soon have the chance to be the dad someone needed.

I looked up and the cottage was only a few hundred yards away. I picked up my pace, and as I reached the driveway, I saw that Mom, Dad and Joe were on the beach sitting around a fire. I ducked into the cottage, grabbed the phone and dialed Lilly's number.

"Nick, thank God. I tried calling the number you gave me three times, but no one answered. Nick, I got it."

"Got it? You mean ..."

"I'm not pregnant."

I was silent for a few moments. Even though I thought I should be relieved, I felt unsettled. At first, I couldn't identify what it was that I felt.

"Nick, are you there? Did you hear me?"

"I heard you. That's great."

Lilly described her anxiety over the last few days and how she felt when she realized she wasn't pregnant, but I was too distant to hear much of what she said. Eventually, we said goodbye and hung up.

I stood in the living room and thought at first that I should be relieved, but what I really felt was a slightly disappointed. I had almost hoped that I would get the chance.

Still, I wasn't ready yet. I looked out the window on to the shore, and saw Dad smiling and nodding at a story Joe was telling. I stepped outside, grabbed a chair and sat across from Dad. I needed more time with him, to let him show me who he was and for me to learn how to get what I needed.

## LETTING DEAD CATS LIE

I didn't intend to kill Barnaby. I also didn't mean to lie about it.

Here's how it happened: I woke up this morning with the Barnaby kneading the down comforter. I hate it when he does that, because his claws tear into the cover and feathers end up everywhere, not to mention Louise finds it necessary to buy *another* comforter at a hundred bucks a pop. Like we can afford that. I ask her every time why we keep buying new comforters when we know the cat will just do it again, or why we can't just get the cat declawed or shut the door to our bedroom. She used to say, "Because I want a nice bedroom, and declawing him is cruel and Katrina comes in here when she has nightmares," but now she usually just ignores me. She's probably just as tired of me complaining about it as I am of it happening.

So, whenever I felt the cat padding his paws on the bed, I got into the habit of kicking my feet so he would jump off. This morning, though, Barnaby went too far, and then I went too far and that's what got me into this whole mess. I caught Barnaby sticking his claws into the bedspread, As usual, I kicked at him to get him to stop. Usually he just jumps down from the bed and gives me a sour look, but today he must have been in a bad mood. Barnaby hissed and swatted at me, digging his claws through the sheets and into my leg. I yelped, instinctively kicking my leg, sending Barnaby flying through the air. The problem is, my side of the bed is only a few feet from the wall, so Barnaby didn't have time pull that trick that all cats can do, where they miraculously spin around in mid-air and always end up on their feet. Instead, there were two thuds: one when he hit the wall, head first and at an awkward angle, and another when his limp body hit the floor. As he lay there, motionless, I thought he was just messing with me, as if cats are capable of

trying to make someone feel bad. I did feel bad. He'd hit the wall pretty hard and clearly he was hurting. I justified it to myself, noting that he only flew a few feet. I couldn't have possibly kicked all that hard.

Barnaby wasn't messing with me. He didn't move for a while, and when I finally got out of bed and checked on him, he wasn't breathing. I can only guess that he must have just hit the wall in the perfect way. Maybe his neck snapped or he was so scared he had a heart attack. I didn't know how, I just knew that he was dead, and it was my fault.

I wish I could honestly say that my first thought was how to help Barnaby. It wasn't. Instead, my first thought was that I couldn't tell Louise or Katrina. My daughter, at seven, was too young to understand that it was an accident. Louise might not forgive me.

###

The cat was a present to my daughter Katrina for her seventh birthday. She'd been asking for months for a pet, *any* pet, telling us the lie that every child believes when they say it: that they'd be in charge of it and take care of it and that we wouldn't have to do *anything* to look after it. Louise and I decided to get her a cat, a low-maintenance animal that wouldn't need much attention, in the event Katrina didn't follow through on her promise. We figured that we could leave a cat home alone for a few days if we ever wanted to get away.

Katrina's vow turned out to be true. She doted on Barnaby like he was her child. Other little girls had their baby dolls, but Katrina had Barnaby. Ever since he was a kitten, she would bring him into bed with her at night and would dress him up in doll clothes and push him around in a stroller during the day. Eventually, we told Katrina that she couldn't sleep with Barnaby. We figured the poor cat needed a break.

Spending so much time together created a bond between them. When Katrina finally started going to school, Barnaby took it hard. He would wait for her at the door after she left to catch the school bus, and would be there again when she finally got home from school. Katrina loved Barnaby more than anything, which is why finding out Barnaby was gone would be awful. Knowing it was me who killed him would be devastating.

###

I was a hero on the day I gave Barnaby to Katrina. Louise, in all her kindness, let me be the one to give her the kitten, figuring it would help if Katrina and I had something to connect over. I made sure to give her the kitten last, so that all the other gifts built up to this one. Throughout the whole party, the pin the tail on the donkey game, the running and screaming of 15 seven-year-old girls, the birthday cake and the candles, the ice cream and the sugar shock, I was worried that one of the little girls would open the door to the laundry room where I had hidden him or Katrina would hear his plaintive mews. Turns out, I had nothing to worry about -- 15 girls made sure of that on their own, running around and having a shrieking good time.

Finally, after all the other gifts had been opened and wrapping paper was strewn about and little girls were nearly comatose after coming down from sugar-high, it was my turn to give my gift to my little girl. Louise had given Katrina a set of Barbies earlier, but I knew that those would be forgotten as soon as I brought the kitten out. I said, "Katrina, you've got one more gift," then I popped open the laundry room door and, right on cue, a flash of orange and white fuzz flew out right at Katrina. She screamed, her voice piercing over the murmur of the other kids, "Kitty! Daddy, you got me a kitty!?"

The memory of that day, juxtaposed with this one, seemed bittersweet. I looked down at Barnaby, his fur more matted and darker orange than when he was a kitten, and



knew that I couldn't tell her the truth. I couldn't let something that made me a hero in my daughter's eyes turn me into a disappointment. I knew what it was like to be disappointed in your father.

###

When I was six, my father forgot my birthday. It wasn't the forgetting that hurt so much, but how he handled it, really. When he came home from work, I looked up at him expectantly, waiting for him to tell me, "Happy birthday." Waiting, really, for him to pull out a gift from his briefcase, perhaps the Matchbox cars I had asked for or maybe something else, a surprise that I hadn't thought I wanted but really did. But instead, as I followed him from the mudroom to the kitchen and then into the living room, he just asked, "Why are you staring at me, Jerry?" I told him it was my birthday. "Shoot. Sorry. Guess I'll have to mark it down on the calendar for next year."

###

Burying Barnaby was the easy part. I dug a hole in our backyard, past the expanse of green grass and out beyond the tree line. The hard part was figuring out a way to get a dead cat past my wife and daughter. When you see a cat, you don't really think they're all that big, but sneaking a lifeless cat out is not as easy as sticking it under your coat.

I used a pillowcase. I picked Barnaby up, his dead weight feeling heavier than his 12 pounds, and dropped him into the cotton casing. I knew I couldn't just throw the pillowcase over my shoulder and walk out, though, because it would've been pretty obvious something was up. I looked around the room and in the closet I saw the laundry basket, half full with our whites. I figured the pillowcase would blend in, so I dropped Barnaby in

the basket and covered him up with several pairs of socks and underwear.

I had to make it through the kitchen, where a door led to the laundry room, which led out to our garage. The problem was that our kitchen opened up to our living room, where either Katrina or Louise most likely would be. I tried to walk as quickly as I could. I made it into the kitchen, looking straight ahead at the door in front of me, somehow hoping that if I didn't see anyone else that they couldn't see me. But Louise was in the living room, off of the kitchen and saw me carrying the basket. She sat up straight on the couch. "Where are you going with the laundry basket?"

Without stopping, I said over my shoulder, "I'm just bringing these dirty clothes down to the washer for you." I pulled the door open and stepped through the door, all in one motion.

###

Dad didn't say much, but when he did talk, it was usually a lie. I remember Greg and I would sit on the bench seat in our old rusty Suburban, while Dad drove and Mom acted as the navigator, staring down at the map and calling out directions. When Dad would miss a turn, as he inevitably would -- I think my father had the worst reaction time in history -- he would blame it on her. "Why didn't you tell me to turn there?" he would ask, lifting both hands in exasperation. Or when he came home from work in the evenings, his face contorted into a pained look, he would say, "Everything's fine."

Taken alone, they were small lies, things people say and do every day. When we were kids, Greg and I hardly noticed them. Over time, though, they added up, and they were unmistakable to us. We grew to hate lies and liars, having been around both so much. It got so that I believed that Dad's quietude was a calculated move. The more he pursed his lips, the fewer mistruths slipped out from between them.

My father's relative silence had another effect. Because of his economy with words, each one he spoke gained that much more power. Whereas most parents had to raise their voice to get their children to comply, Dad often could do it in one word. He barely even needed to raise his voice. "Sit." We sat. "Quiet." We shut our yaps. "Stop." Whatever it was, we stopped. It was as if he was afraid of the world around him becoming too noisy, too active, for him to control. Just like his lips, he kept things tight.

###

Walking back to the garage, a shovel dripping wet dirt over my shoulder, I started calculating the story I would have to tell to cover up Barnaby's death. I decided that it would be best if I just remained quiet about the situation for now, until I could put together a credible explanation for Barnaby's disappearance.

As I reached the house, I knocked the excess dirt from the edge of the shovel, wanting so much to be able to shake off my guilt the same way. I replayed tossing the lifeless body of our cat into the hole I had just dug and then tossing dirt back over his matted orange fur until he was covered, already beginning to rot.

I stood in the garage, waiting to open the door. I knew that Katrina was in there, watching cartoons on our big-screen TV while lying on the couch in her pajamas. I was waiting for the look on my face to go away, the one that would give me away. I waited, hoping that a combination of time and thinking about something else would scrub that look from my face enough that I could go in and face my daughter.

I wondered whether Katrina already knew if Barnaby was missing. We'd been extra careful around Barnaby recently, because he had gotten out before. I knew if Katrina started wondering about the cat's whereabouts, I would need to have my answers ready. Any hesitation would indicate a cover-up.

So I opened the door quickly, went through the mudroom and veered through the living room and into the kitchen. Katrina was on the couch, transfixed by her cartoons. I could hear the sounds of her cartoons in the background, “Whoosh,” “Zoom,” “Thwack,” “Bam,” “Boom.” I yanked open the refrigerator door and grabbed the half-filled gallon of milk, flipped the top off and poured the remainder into the sink. To no one in particular, I said, “We’re out of milk. I’m going to the store.”

###

By the time I was 12, Greg and I had learned to avoid Dad. Greg was 18 and had his driver’s license, so it was easier for him. Then in the fall, he went off to college and we didn’t hear much from him. I was in junior high, so I joined sports teams each season so that I had an excuse to stay later at school. By the time I got home, Dad was already home from work, so I’d mumble “hello” to him as he sat at the dinner table, reading the newspaper. Then I’d just go upstairs to my room and do my homework or play video games. It wasn’t long until we stopped eating dinner together as a family; I would get home too late, and Greg was gone, so it would’ve been just Mom and Dad, and Mom didn’t feel like making dinner for just two people.

Dad and I didn’t talk much, but he would occasionally come to one of my baseball games. By seventh grade, I was good enough at baseball that I’d won the starting job at second base on the junior varsity team, playing with boys that were three or four years older than me. After one game, Dad picked me up from the locker room in his truck.

“That play, in the third inning.” He turned to face me. “You were *scared*.”

He caught me by surprise. I was expecting him to compliment me. My single in the eighth inning drove home the winning run. Here he was, though, talking about a play in which our catcher bounced a throw into centerfield on a stolen base attempt. “The

throw was in the dirt, Dad.”

“You could’ve had it if you didn’t shy away from the runner.”

He turned back and concentrated on the road. We didn’t say anything else to each other for the rest of the ride home.

###

When I got home, I slipped in the back door. Katrina was still on the couch, the TV was blaring her cartoons, but she was asleep underneath a pink flannel blanket. Upstairs, in our bedroom, Louise was folding clothes on the bed.

Louise looked surprised to see me. “What’re you doing here?”

“I live here,” I said, smirking.

“You left. Where’d you go?”

“Store.”

“What for? And why were you were up so early this morning?”

Louise’s rapid-fire questions angered me. I didn’t have any answers for her, and it felt as if she were interrogating me.

“Aren’t you supposed to be watching Katrina? It’s your morning. If you were doing what you’re supposed to do, I wouldn’t be awake now.”

Louise tilted her head, surprised. She looked like she was about to say something back to me, but then she shook her head and walked out. I was just as surprised as her by what I said. I wanted to take it back, but I knew that would require me to explain what was going on.

###

On the day Katrina was born, I promised myself I'd never be like my father. I solemnly swore that I would always tell her I loved her, every day, even if I didn't feel like it at the time. I vowed that I would be there for her, whatever that means. I think then it meant then that I would be physically present, always ready to help, or listen, or to do whatever she needed. Finally, I told myself that I would never lie to her. My father had lied to me too much. I didn't want her to ever feel about me the way I felt about him.

In the seven years since Katrina was born, I've realized how hard that is, because you have to do it every day. Every. Single. Day. I was asking myself to be perfect in a world in which there is no such thing as perfect and where trying your hardest to be good every day is all you can do. Sometimes I go a week or two when I feel like I'm not reaching those goals as a father. It's so hard to come back from that when every other face in our house is another mirror, showing me how much I've screwed up. I keep trying, hoping that my effort is enough for what they need.

Sometimes I wonder, though, how many times can I screw up before they see through me? Before they decide that I'm not worth their time? Before they give up on me, like I did with my dad.

###

When I was nine, I wanted my Little League coach to be my dad. His name was Mr. Auschenbrewitz, or something like that, but he told us just to call him Mr. A because nobody could pronounce his name right anyway. I remember *hoping* that Dad would be late to pick me up, because Mr. A never left before everyone's ride showed up. Sometimes, when I got my wish, I would spend those 15 or 20 minutes alone with Mr. A, sitting on the back bumper of his Dodge Daytona and talking. Thinking back, I did most of the talking and Mr. A did a lot of listening. In fact, I don't think Mr. A spoke much more

than my father, but somehow talking with him was different. Mr. A looked me in the eyes when I spoke.

I told Mr. A things that I never would've told Dad, like the time I swore at Mrs. Middendorf because I wasn't ready for a math quiz or how Justin Vallord would punch me in the stomach every week when we were walking home from school. I told him about the C I got on a math quiz, when I told Dad that I'd gotten a B+.

I remember both the feeling of being punched, like I'd never ever get to experience the unconscious satisfaction of a breath again, and the few words Mr. A said to me when I told him about it: "You don't deserve that, Jerry."

###

Louise stepped out on the back deck while I was pouring gas into the lawnmower. She stood a bit away from me, but not far enough that her shadow hid the afternoon sun and made it hard for me to tell how full the tank was. I stopped pouring and looked up.

Instead, she asked, "You okay, Jerry?"

Whenever Louise didn't like how I was acting, she did this maddening thing where she pretended that she was concerned about me, but she always brought it back to the fact that she didn't like what I was doing. I knew I had to be careful.

"Yeah, I'm fine." I moved the lawnmower back into the sun, and resumed pouring. I was hoping that if I went back to work, it would mark the end of our conversation.

"You've been acting strange today," Louise said, raising her voice at the end as if it was a question.

I looked down at the lawnmower and let out a slight grunt. Louise waited for an answer for a few moments. Then she gave up and went inside.

###

When I was done mowing the lawn, I went inside sat on the couch. The TV was off, but Katrina was still in the living room, playing with her dolls on the floor. I watched her for a few minutes.

Katrina stopped playing and looked up at me. “Dad?”

“What is it?”

She hesitated for a second, like she wasn’t sure whether she wanted the answer to what she was about to ask. I felt my shoulders tighten, thinking that she might ask me about Barnaby. I imagined her reaction if I told her he was dead, and pictured me comforting her. Then, in my mind, I saw Katrina storming away from me after I told her that it was me who killed Barnaby.

“I think this boy at school likes me.”

“Oh.” I didn’t do enough to make it sound like a question. Instead, it sounded like an exhalation, a sigh of relief. I tried to redeem myself. “What’s his name? Why do you think he likes you?”

“Jason. He tried to kiss me after playground yesterday, when we were standing in line.” When she told me this, she grabbed two dolls and smashed their faces together.

“He tried to kiss you?”

“Yeah, but I didn’t let him. And I told Mrs. Katchuk what he did, and she gave him detention for two days and made him apologize to me.”

“She did? What did he say to you?” I was proud of my girl for turning away her pushy little would-be suitor.

“He said he was sorry, but he didn’t mean it.”

“How do you know he didn’t mean it?”

“Because he told Allison Schames that I was a pig face.” Katrina scrunched up



her mouth and nose, trying to make it look like she had a snout.

“A pig face? That’s silly!” I giggled, but when I looked at Katrina, she wasn’t laughing with me. So I said, “You know you don’t deserve that, right?”

###

I spent the rest of the morning outside, working on projects that I’d put off for months, trying to avoid Katrina and Louise. I was distracted, though, while in my mind I waged a mental battle over whether to tell them about what happened, and if so, how.

I knew, for both my sake and theirs, that I couldn’t keep up my current approach of trying to stay silent about Barnaby’s death. I remembered the lies Dad used to tell Greg and me when we were little, and how angry they made me. Then I recalled how much more frustrating it was when Dad was silent, knowing that there was some untruth behind it.

That left me with three choices: tell them the complete truth, tell them an altered version of what happened, or flat-out lie. I thought about my pledge to myself, to be honest to the both of them. Then I thought about what that would mean in this situation. Katrina would be emotionally wrecked, at least for a little while. Even though I knew she’d rebound from it, I worried that it would break her trust in me, and I wasn’t sure I could face her disappointment.

On the other hand, if my story varied from the truth at all, I would face my own personal recrimination. I already had started to feel that nagging guilt of knowing that I was hiding something from Katrina and Louise. I wondered if I could handle the ever-present worry about having to lie to cover up the truth, or the worry about being found out.

One way or another, I was going to suffer consequences of my mistake. My

choice came down to this: did I want those consequences to come from my wife and daughter, or from myself.

In the back yard, the sun reached its apex. I wiped sweat from my forehead and went inside to grab some lunch. Katrina and Louise were standing in the kitchen. Katrina was inconsolable, sobbing while Louise rubbed her shoulder.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

Louise looked up at me. “Jerry, have you seen Barnaby?”

Even with all the hours of thinking I had done about this moment, I still wasn’t sure of what to do. I noted that my first reaction when Louise asked was to shake my head. Louise’s eyes were bright, hopeful that I knew where Barnaby was. Katrina still was sniffing, and the tears were starting to dry on her cheek. She, too, looked up at me, inquisitively. I wanted to give them what they wanted: an answer that would satisfy them both.

But I didn’t have that. I had answers, but none that they wanted to hear. I said, “I haven’t seen him since this morning.”

## THE CHALLENGE OF CONNECTING

Friday night, and Sam considered his options. He could stay in, order Thai food and watch “Friday Night Fights” on ESPN2. He could whittle down his Netflix instant queue. Or he could go to a party held by a coworker he hardly knew. Sam sat in his 400-square-foot studio apartment; he looked out the window and watched the sun set on the Potomac River. He glanced down at his BlackBerry again, the screen showing an eVite from Jake Sandvenner. He couldn’t believe he was considering going to the party.

Sam wondered why Jake would even invite him. They had worked together on a few projects, but conversations between them never moved past something like: “Hey man, how’s it going?” “Good. You?” “Good.” Though he didn’t know much about him personally, Sam lumped Jake into the category of people who worked upstairs from him at his job in a consulting firm on K St. in D.C. Although he got along with the majority of the people his department – Sam worked on the first floor, in media relations, sending out press releases – the people in the other departments upstairs weren’t Sam’s type. Sam’s co-workers called the upstairs female employees “pocket girls,” in reference to their petite stature and precisely matching outfits, which made them seem like dolls who could fit neatly into your pocket. The males upstairs weren’t much different, with argyle socks that matched their sweater vests. Up on the eighth floor, every day was a fashion show, and Jake often was the winner.

Sam owned one pair of brown dress shoes and often wore the same pair of khakis for three days straight. He couldn't imagine spending more than 30 seconds each day considering what to wear. Usually, it was the first thing within reach in the "clean" pile of clothes next to his bed. The clean pile frequently overlapped with the dirty one.

Tonight, Sam had three options, two of which meant he would stay at home alone. He pictured himself lying on his couch, another empty Dominos box sitting on his second-hand glass-top coffee table, covered in soda spills and Doritos dust, and the thought disgusted him. Up until three months ago, he considered himself a pretty social person. He and Christina, his old roommate and best friend, used to go out at least every Friday and Saturday night, and often one or two weeknights. But then Christina met a guy and moved in with him, and Sam's social life dried up. It turned out that Christina who had been Sam's social catalyst; somehow Sam never noticed this. He had contributed to their plans at times, but he found his motivation sapped when it was up to him to take the initiative. For a while after Christina moved out, he had been invited to some parties via email invites, the residual effect of his connection to her. After a few months of ignoring them, the invites began to dry up, then they completely stopped.

At first, Sam tried to hint to people at work that he was looking for things to do on a weekend. He'd start asking his first-floor coworkers about their weekend plans on Thursday, hoping that maybe they'd add, "Hey, you want to come?" to the end of their descriptions. That didn't work. Then he moved on to Facebook. He posted, "Anybody in DC want to go see Drive By Truckers at the 9:30 Club tonight?" and "Didn't plan ahead, what's going on in DC this weekend?" Five hundred "friends" and still nothing. Sam

got so desperate to fill his social calendar that at one point that he started looking at the “Strictly Platonic” ads on Craigslist. He thought maybe if he found another guy to hang around with, he could meet a few new friends and get the ball rolling on his social life. But he quickly encountered two facts: first, the guys who post ads on Craigslist are just as desperate as he was, and second, their desperation was to find something far more than “platonic.”

Sam was lost. He wasn’t well equipped for developing friendships. As a boy, Sam was so shy that he was incapable of ordering for himself in restaurants. He would whisper what he wanted to his father, who would then order for him. He was better as an adult, but he often found himself at a loss for words when it came time to talk with another person. It was like an amputee who could still feel the limb; he could feel the words in some unnamable place but when he wanted them there on his lips, flipped deftly off his tongue, they weren’t. Instead, he felt eyes staring at him, like when you can sense someone out of sight looking at you, but Sam felt a dozen sets of eyes on him. It was as if people stopped their lives to turn and stare at him. It was the most selfish insecurity Sam could think of; he was the center of attention in his own mind, but it wasn’t the sort of attention anyone would want.

8:30 p.m. Sam finally had to make a choice. If he waited any longer, he knew that he’d sink into the deep crevice of the couch and not crawl out until the morning. Again. And it would probably happen again the next night. At the thought of it, Sam pushed himself up with the ratty arms of the couch and walked back and forth in the tiny area between his bed and the kitchen. Every time he walked past the couch, he grazed his fin-

gertips along the top of the seatback, feeling each individual fiber, like it was braille and it read over and over, “Come, lie down.”

Sam felt that his life was sinking into that couch. He had spent months trying to avoid this moment, where he finally admitted to himself an emotion that to him felt like resignation. He was lonely. At the onset, after Christina had started to pull away, he’d reframed reality by convincing himself that he liked to be alone. He attempted to live as a loner, and convince himself that it was a life he wanted. He went to diners late at night and sat at the bar; the only person he talked to was the waitress, when she took his order. He looked around the diners and listened to couples, finding the one couple where the woman was nagging the guy about being too drunk, and think, “Thank God I don’t have to deal with that.” Or he went to movie theaters alone, laughed as loud as he wanted at the jokes, spilled popcorn all over himself or got up and left if he didn’t like the film. In his head, Sam kept a running tally of the advantages of going it alone, and he kept piling up the reasons why he preferred a singular life. But there always was a tug, trying to pull the cover off something beneath Sam’s justifications. Tonight, that something felt like the truth – he was lonely. The heaviness of his loneliness finally, on this night, outweighed all the excuses he’d made up over the past few months.

That epiphany led Sam to what appeared to be an abandoned warehouse with a rusting metal door. He scratched his neck, itchy from shaving for the first time in a week. He expected Jake to live in a high-rise where all the apartments had tan carpets, white walls and kitchens with fake marble countertops and stainless steel appliances. Like the uniforms he wore to work, Sam expected Jake to have a uniform apartment.

Sam yanked open the door. Red dust showered down onto his leather jacket, which he had pulled out of storage bins in the back of his closet. He brushed himself off and stepped into the huge lift elevator, pressing '3' as he turned to face the closing doors.

As the elevator groaned and slowly creaked upward, Sam imagined the type of people who would be at the party. In his mind, Sam pictured walking in and being surrounded by khaki-clad guys, all dressed as if they had come from the office. He looked down at his jeans and his plaid button-up shirt and wondered if they would cause him to stick out. In the background, he guessed he would hear the catty chatter of a gaggle of pocket girls. The dread rushed over Sam like an avalanche. For a moment, he considered hitting the button for the second floor and taking the stairs back down, but then he pictured the indent in his couch and reconsidered.

The elevator doors opened they revealed hardwood floors and people packed in, their bodies overlapping each other; Sam was then hit with a wall of noise. Music, the sort that played in clubs that you paid a cover to get in to, blasted over the speakers. It was loud enough to hurt Sam's ears, its rhythmic bass shaking the walls, while lamps with cream-colored tassels shimmied perilously close to the edge of the end tables on either end of the shabby, second-hand couch in the center of the living room.

Sam walked into the apartment. The noise was a thick liquid that his body pushed through. To his left, a guy in all black – t-shirt, jeans, sneakers – licked a girl's neck like it was a sweaty, salty lollipop. The girl's black spaghetti strap dress had fallen off her shoulder enough to expose a bright red lace bra. She caught Sam staring and winked. Sam felt the heat of the blood rushing to his cheeks and quickly turned away. In front of

him, six guys sat cross-legged, each holding a surgical tube that originated from a hookah in the center of a low-slung wooden coffee table. Sam shuddered, remembering the panic attack he had the last time he smoked weed.

This was not the party Sam had expected. For a second, he thought that he might've made a mistake and happened upon another party, one to which he hadn't been invited. But then he saw Jake standing across the living room and walked over to say hello. Behind Jake were two windows that overlooked the skyline, the city's lights extending for seemed like miles. For a moment, Sam wished he were outside in that expanse, wide and uninhibited, walking down the street and watching passersby unconcerned by his attention. Instead, he was packed in with all these strangers, their body heat combining to create an oppressive, enveloping heat. Sam thought, "Another reason I like to be alone." He shook his head. He was justifying his loneliness again.

Sam slithered through a group of people, but when he reached Jake, he was talking to a guy wearing a sweatshirt with the hood up. Sam stood a few feet away and to the side of Jake, holding one arm with the other, hoping he would be seen so that he didn't have to interrupt the conversation. It didn't work. Jake just kept talking to the man under the hood. Sam tried to move to a position where Jake could see him better. He knew that he should just reach out and say, "excuse me," but that thought paralyzed Sam. He knew Jake and hoodie-guy would think he was rude, or worse, the kind of guy who interrupts conversations. Sam really didn't know what that meant, but he knew he didn't want hoodie-guy's first impression to be, "That's the guy who interrupted my conversation with Jake." Sam realized what he was thinking was crazy. He tried to consider what he would



think if someone interrupted his conversation – no big deal, he thought – but he couldn't bring himself to say anything.

Mercifully, as Sam was contemplating the repercussions of interrupting, Jake turned toward him. "Sam, I'm so glad you could make it."

Sam wanted to say, "I can't believe you invited me," but he bit his tongue. Instead, he complimented Jake on his apartment. Jake thanked him, but didn't follow up with anything else. Sam shifted his weight from one leg to another. Usually at this point in a conversation, whomever Sam was talking to would ask how work was or comment on the weather or reference some sporting event. Jake didn't do any of those things. He just looked past Sam, out to the party. Jake's eyes flickered with recognition and he nodded his head at someone behind Sam.

"Keg's in the kitchen, plastic cups in the cupboard above it," Jake said, clapping his hand on Sam's shoulder. "Help yourself – I'm going to go mingle with more of my guests."

Sam was left standing – alone – in the middle of the noise and the heat. The mass of bodies encircling him emanated warmth so intense it felt as if Sam were being swallowed up by it. He felt the sting of salty sweat in his eye, and he rubbed at it with the sleeve of his shirt, then unbuttoned the shirt at both wrists and rolled his sleeves up to his elbows. Hoping to both escape from the temperature and satiate his thirst, Sam walked into the kitchen, and grabbed a red plastic cup.

Sam slowly pumped the keg, tilted his cup and raised the black plastic spigot to its plastic edge. He gently pressed the lever on the spigot, and watched foamy beer ooze out

into the milk-white center, splashing over the backwards “Dixie” imprint. Sam wouldn’t have admitted to anyone, but he was taking his time, on purpose. He knew that once he finished this task, there was no place to go but back into the living room, where he would look into the eyes of strangers, and, despite desperately wanting for something to come out of his mouth, he knew nothing would.

He turned toward the living room and walked back to the center of the large main room, carefully staring at his cup under the auspices of not spilling it while being jostled by the throng of people, but more because it helped him avoid eye contact. Sam surveyed the room and was surprised to find that he didn’t recognize anyone in the place, save for Jake; he’d assumed that other coworkers would be there, but it appeared as if Sam was the only one. Despite his distaste for his coworkers, Sam wished one would walk in to give him someone familiar to talk to. Instead, Sam made his way near a window, which had a ledge in front of it on which he could sit. Sam sort of half sat, half stood in the windowsill, undecided on whether he should cross his arms or let them hang at his sides. He sipped his beer and began to scan the room, watching people walk by. Sam thought he could just blend in, drink his beer and people-watch.

Instead, as Sam looked up from his plastic cup, he saw a lanky man with washed out brown hair walking toward him. Sam immediately noticed the man’s sideburns; they stretched from his ears to the edge of a thin beard running down his chin that eventually met a goatee that encircled his pale, pursed lips. The man approached Sam, extended his hand and introduced himself as Brad.

Sam straightened up, noticing that Brad stood at least three inches taller, and

shook Brad's hand. Sam began to pull his hand away from Brad's grip, but as he did so, he realized that Brad wasn't ready to let go. Instead, Brad brought his left hand up to Sam's right wrist, clasping it, and smiled, his piercing eyes focused on Sam's hesitant gaze. Though it disconcerted him, Sam was glad to have someone approach him.

Sam was determined not to let what happened with Jake happen again. He said the only thing he could think of. "So what do you do?"

"I'm not going to answer that," Brad said.

The bass beat of a song Sam didn't recognize was so intense that it seemed as if his eardrums were vibrating. He leaned his ear in toward Brad's face. "Excuse me?"

"I don't answer that question at parties," Brad yelled, as he finally loosened his grip on Sam's hand, then took a seat on the windowsill. Sam, now feeling discomfort because of his standing position, joined Brad, both men facing out toward the revelers.

"Why not?" Sam yelled back, but it was just as the songs were switching. A few people standing within feet of Sam turned to look at him with sour looks. "Sorry," he said, as the music kicked back on.

"It's too much of a cop-out. I mean, say you ask me, 'What do you do, Brad?' and I answer, 'I'm an investment banker.' You might say, 'That's interesting.' But what do you really know about investment banking?"

Sam didn't know a single person that worked in banking. He didn't even know what an investment banker did all day. "Nothing," Sam said.

"But what do you think of investment bankers?"

Sam shrugged his shoulders. "I just told you, I don't know anything about them."

Brad waved his hand. “Yes, of course, but I’m willing to bet that you have an opinion of bankers. Right?”

Sam paused for a second, trying to picture an investment banker. As he was thinking, Brad sat down next to him on the windowsill. All Sam could think of was Gordon Gecko and Bernie Madoff. He didn’t know if they were actually investment bankers, but he did know that neither was held in particularly high esteem. “It seems like they’re pompous jerks,” Sam said, adding, “But I don’t actually know any bankers.”

Brad shook his head. “Doesn’t matter. If somebody tells you they’re an investment banker, or a garbage man or a teacher, you’ve already got an impression of them, and that impression can ruin a conversation right from the start.”

Sam shoved his hands into his pockets and slunk down a bit, getting more comfortable with the conversation. He could feel his keys in his left pocket, his cell phone and his money clip in his right. Always the same pockets. It gave Sam a sense of certainty knowing that at least those things would always be the same. His fingers fiddled with the rubber cover on his phone, flipping up the sharp edge over and over, like a hand mantra. Touching the phone made Sam want to call someone, but there was no one to call, or at least no one he really *wanted* to talk to. He began fantasizing calling Brad. Something like, *Hey, man, want to go to a movie?* Or *Oh, hey, Brad, I was just heading out to a bar to watch the game. Want to come?* Just as quickly as the thought came, it sank. He felt like there was a line in his brain that rose with the hope of friendship, and then plummeted into the toxic liquids down by the brain stem, where a soup has been concocted with all the negative thoughts a person can have. *Stupid loser, there’s no way this guy would*

*hang out with you if he knew how pathetic you are.* Sam tried to push the line back up, but it was drowning in that noxious quagmire.

“So what *should* we talk about?”

“Good question. We could talk about literature, movies, art, or we could talk about what people talk about when they’re at parties.” Brad half-smiled, half-smirked, clearly proud of what he thought was a clever suggestion.

“Very meta.”

Brad slowly inched closer to Sam. Before Sam realized how close Brad had gotten, Brad was leaning over to say something in Sam’s ear. “Listen, I know I just met you and all, and I don’t mean to be presumptuous, but I feel a bit of a connection here. You want to go someplace where we could have a little privacy?”

Sam tensed. Without meaning to, he pulled away from Brad. Sam realized his reaction. “God, I’m sorry.”

“Sorry for what?”

“I must be sending mixed signals or something.”

“Mixed signals? I was pretty sure you were sending me the ‘Let’s go find some privacy’ signal.”

“No, I wasn’t sending that signal. Or at least I didn’t mean to send that signal.”

“Yeah, I’m getting that now. You don’t need to explain,” Brad said.

Sam took a deep breath. “It’s flattering, I’m flattered. I mean, thank you, really. But I’m not gay.”

“Stop. You’re not gay, that’s cool. I just thought you knew that I was flirting with

you.”

“I guess I’m kind of oblivious about those sorts of ... “

“Sorry to cut you off, Sam, but I’m going to get moving.”

Before Sam could say it was nice to meet him, Brad had turned and walked away. Sam watched him break into a group of guys standing next to a faded table that had been fashioned into a makeshift bar, covered in half-filled bottles of Coke and tonic water and even emptier bottles of gin and Jack Daniels. He watched Brad shake hands with one of the guys and then read Brad’s lips as he said, “So, what do you do?”

Even though Sam felt a bit cheap, like he was worth using a line on but not good enough for a conversation, he still lamented Brad leaving. For a brief few minutes, Sam wasn’t so alone. He had felt the surging electricity of synapses firing in his brain that hadn’t seen action in months, welcoming the challenge of connecting together to create his half of a conversation. He looked out from the windowsill into the crowd of people and saw dozens of faces, none of whom seemed specific to him. They were just faces on bodies, wrapped in skin on bone around blood and sinew and hearts and minds, the latter of which Sam didn’t know how to navigate – either his own or someone else’s. He tried making eye contact with one of those unnamed faces, but no one would look at him, or, if they did, they quickly looked away.

There was only one thing worse, Sam decided, than sitting on a windowsill at a party alone in a crowd of people, and that was thinking about it. He looked down at the empty red Solo cup in his hand, hopped down from the ledge and walked to the kitchen for a refill. There was a line at the keg, but Sam welcomed it. He knew that as long as he

was waiting in line for a beer, he wouldn't look out of place standing alone in the middle of a party. Waiting for beer was a purpose, and an excuse, that no one at the party could question. When he got to the front, Sam only filled his cup three-quarters full. He could come back sooner that way.

Sam returned to the living room with a full beer. Not seeing anyone else he knew, he flopped down on the couch, spilling some of his beer on his knee as he sank into the deep seat. As Sam settled in, the cushions shifted. A slight, bony girl with skin the color of café au lait and black hair with neon pink streaks shifted with the couch. Their thighs touched, but the girl, engrossed in conversation with a girl in blonde pigtails standing at the end of the couch, didn't seem to notice. Trying not to draw attention, Sam shimmied away from her. He didn't want her to think he was rubbing up against her on purpose. From this close, though, Sam noticed that she smelled like vanilla and cigarette smoke.

He thought about trying to strike up a conversation with her. He'd always liked girls who didn't seem to care about fitting in, and this girl fit that mold. Besides her hair, she had a full-sleeve tattoo on her left arm – a pinup girl sitting on a tree branch in the midst of a forest. The girl in the tattoo had black hair with a pink stripes and was winking. It felt to Sam almost intimate, like she was winking at him. He didn't say anything, though. The thought of attempting to strike up a conversation made Sam feel weighty, like a force was holding him down, stuck there forever.

Sam, sipping his beer, watched people walk by. A guy with hair slicked with gel into what looked like a shark fin, wearing a black t-shirt with a large "XXX" in the middle of it – which Sam took to mean "straight-edge," not the other meaning -- fiddled with

the music player. Another guy, his slouch negating his height, shuffled Birkenstock's across the carpet, nearly tripping on the too-long cuffs of his pants. His hair was so long that it fell down over a shirt that read, "Ithaca is Gorges."

Sam noticed he was clenching his teeth. He detected that about himself often recently. He would be sitting at his desk at work and gradually become aware that his calves were tightened and his fists were balled. He would be reading a book and catch himself grinding his teeth. Sam would stop himself, take a deep breath and try to relax, but the unease wouldn't leave. Instead, Sam would go back to whatever he was doing; he figured if he could ignore the stress, it would go away eventually. Instead, he was noticing it more and more. It didn't go away; it was building.

"Who are you?"

The words startled Sam. Pink streaks was saying something to him, but he didn't hear what it was. He put one hand to his ear to indicate he hadn't caught what she said.

The girl tilted her head and sneered. "You deaf?"

"No, I just didn't hear you." Sam was surprised by her vitriol. Maybe it was her tiny stature – her feet barely reach the floor – or her round face, which gave her cheeks that a grandmother had pinched a time or two.

"I said, 'Who are you'?"

The girl raised her voice loud enough that Sam was afraid other people at the party would notice. He looked around for a moment to make sure no one was staring. Assured that no one had noticed anything, he turned back to the girl and started to answer, but she cut him off.



“What, you’re just not going to answer me? Who are you and what are you doing on my couch?” She raised her eyebrow at the end of the question, and Sam saw she had a tiny metal barbell pierced there. Again, she didn’t wait for an answer. “And don’t think that I don’t know what you were trying to do earlier when you sat down next to me, you creep.” At this, the girl stood up and took a few steps back. The friend she was talking to earlier stood next to her, in what seemed to Sam like a united front against her alleged perpetrator.

Sam knew what she meant, and even though he knew he hadn’t mean anything inappropriate when his leg grazed her thigh earlier, he didn’t want to admit to her that it happened. “What are you talking about?” He emphasized the word “talking,” trying to underscore his disbelief.

“I’m talking about you feeling up my thigh. I’ve read about guys like you on Jezebel. You pretend to sit innocently next to girls on the train or something and then you rub up against them.”

Sam felt like the situation was escalating and soon would be out of control. He knew that he needed to stop its rise quickly, before it got worse. In the midst of it, though, he briefly thought that even though what she was saying was preposterous, Sam admired her for saying something. She couldn’t weigh more than 110 lbs. after Thanksgiving supper, yet she was confronting him for what she thought was wrong. Still, he just wished he were watching her confront someone else, not him.

“Look, when I sat down, the couch cushions sank a bit and we *may* have grazed legs a bit ...”

“So you admit it?”

Now Sam was sure that other people had started noticing what was going on. He could feel eyes on him, but he didn't want to look around now and meet their stares. “No, I didn't admit anything. Nothing happened. If anything, your leg slid onto mine.”

“You're trying to blame the victim? How very manly of you.” Her words were coated in angry sarcasm, slowing them to a crawl.

Sam realized that nothing he could say would deescalate the situation. He briefly considered just turning around and quickly leaving, but he figured he couldn't make it from the couch to the elevator without someone stopping him, not to mention he'd have to wait for the elevator. No other ideas came to him. His prior admiration for the girl had mostly dissipated. He figured he would just try to apologize – even though he didn't feel like he should – and hope that the girl would let him explain.

Before he had the chance to say anything, though, Jake stumbled into the living room from the kitchen, singing along with the song now blasting out of the speakers. “I can't get no ... satisfaction. Cuz I try and I try and I try and I try.” Jake belted the lyrics as loudly as he could, sounding like a day one contestant on American Idol that the judges wouldn't even let finish the song.

Sam saw an opportunity. He thought if he told Jake what happened, he would sympathize with him and maybe just throw the girl out. Even though they barely knew each other, Sam figured that Jake would stand up for another guy in this situation. Sam pictured Jake grabbing the girl by the arm and leading her to the elevator,

Sam never got the chance to explain to Jake. Before he could explain what was

happening to him, the girl spotted Jake, ran over to him and said something Sam couldn't hear. Then she turned toward Sam and pointed directly at him.

Jake's eyes locked on Sam's while his face twisted into a snarl, his lips curling up at the edges and his eyes squinted to razor slits. "What are you doing to my girlfriend?"

"What?" Sam was puzzled. He didn't connect this girl to Jake; he never would have thought Jake would date someone like this pink-haired woman.

Jake started moving toward Sam, bridging the distance in a few steps. As he approached, Sam started to say, "I can explain ..." but for the second time, he didn't have the chance. Jake lunged toward him, his shoulder driving into Sam's sternum. Sam, caught unprepared, couldn't brace himself for the contact, and Jake's momentum took them both to the floor. Upon landing, Sam caught his head on the hardwood floor, stunning him. Jake regained his footing and yanked Sam up off the floor. It was all Sam could do to grab the corner of a nearby chair to gain his balance, but just as Sam was balancing himself, Jake grabbed the front of Sam's shirt with his left hand, yanked him forward while simultaneously raising his right hand up and made a fist. Sam had no chance to defend himself; in a split-second, Jake's fist followed a looping pattern through the air, before abruptly stopping as it met the cartilage and bone of Sam's nose. The sickening crunch of Sam's nose could be heard over the music. Upon contact, Sam's body went limp, collapsing to the floor with a deadened thump.

###

Sam woke up to a blinding pain behind above and behind his eyes. To his left, he heard a beeping sound, like an electronic metronome. He tasted copper in his mouth, causing him to grimace, but the movement shot pain through Sam's entire body. He reached up to touch it, feeling the caked-on blood on his upper lip. The pain felt like it was a physical presence hovering over Sam, like it was a heavy gas resting on top of him, drugging him and causing his focus to come in and out.

Finally, Sam was able to sit up. He looked down to see he was wearing a turquoise gown, beneath which were round disks stuck to his chest. Looking to his left, Sam realized the beeping he heard was his own heart; he was connected to the monitor via wires extending out of the disks on his chest. Sam was in the hospital, but he didn't remember getting there. A nurse in head-to-toe pink scrubs walked in the door, looking down at a clipboard. She took several steps toward Sam, then placed the clipboard on a hook at the end of Sam's bed, oblivious that Sam now was awake. Sam cleared his throat to get her attention.

The nurse put her hand over her heart, patting it several times. "You startled me," she said. She composed herself, then asked, "How are we feeling, Mr. Peploe?"

Sam ignored her question. Instead, he tried to remember what happened. He remembered the awkward confrontation with the pink-haired girl on the couch, and he could recall Jake walking into the room, but he couldn't recollect anything after that. He looked up at the nurse. "How did I get here?"

The nurse smirked. "Friend of yours dropped you off, said you had a bit too much to drink tonight and had an 'accident.' If you ask me, it looks like the accident was you

didn't duck in time, Mr. Peploe." The nurse glanced down at Sam's chart, shook her head, and walked out, leaving Sam alone with his thoughts.

Pain from the center of his face shot down his backbone, causing a chill to go over Sam's whole body. He remembered Jake's fist making contact with his nose. It seemed as if the pain from his nose radiated through him until it reached his fingertips and bounced back toward his core. It was all he could do to mumble, "It hurts."

The nurse fiddled with a few buttons on the monitoring cart at the side of the bed. "This should help with that, Mr. Peploe. Just try to relax."

###

As the alarm sounded, Sam rolled over and slapped at the snooze button, giving himself another 10 minutes to lay alone in bed. Of all days, this was one in which he wished he could just lay in bed all day and not have to face anyone. He knew that today would be a day of answering over and over the question, "What happened to you?" There was no avoiding it. The hospital finally let him leave on Sunday morning, after they reset his nose, affixed a hard plastic splint over it to protect it and ran him through a battery of cognitive tests to make sure he was properly rebounding from the concussion he sustained when his head hit the floor. He followed the doctor's advice and took a few days off, but it was time for him to return to work, and he was full of uncertainty. He wondered if Jake would tell anyone at work what had happened. Sam didn't think he saw anyone else from his company at the party, but he didn't see every person and he didn't know ev-

ery person in his building, so there was the possibility that the news could spread quickly.

Sam wondered what he should tell people and whether he would see Jake. He wasn't sure how he felt about Jake right now, and how Jake felt about him. Despite all those thoughts swirling in his head, Sam decided to go to work anyway. He knew that there might be some awkward situations, but he didn't want to duck them. He felt cowardly for the way he had acted at the party, and he wanted to make up for it. Had he the guts to go interact with people during the party, he wouldn't have secluded himself on the couch, and the situation with Jake's girlfriend never would have happened. None of this, including the pain he still felt in his face, would have happened. That's why he couldn't avoid it now. He couldn't handle not facing a difficult situation again.

He arrived at work at 8:30 a.m., logged on to his email account, cleaned out his inbox and moved on to his first project of the day. Before he knew it, he looked up at the clock on the wall and it was 10 a.m. He felt pretty good about himself. Despite the pain, he was able to focus on his work, and in fact, the concentration required to do his job likely helped him focus on something other than his throbbing nose.

Then at 10:15, Sam received an email that brought the pain back to his nose. It was from Jake. It read, "Can we meet for lunch? I want to talk with you about what happened."

Sam wasn't sure how to respond. The sparse email didn't give Sam any clues as to how Jake felt about the situation. The only way to know was to go to lunch with him. Sam knew he could make up an excuse -- too much work, another meeting, not feeling well -- but just like coming to work that day, he needed to address the situation head on.

Sam wrote back and agreed to the lunch. Just to feel like he had some control, he set the location -- a diner down the street from their building. He didn't want this to be a fancy lunch, and he wanted it to be a place that served quickly, just in case the situation became tense. Sam spent the next hour and a half playing out all the possible scenarios in his mind. He figured Jake could give him a heartfelt apology about his nose; it was a misunderstanding, after all. However, Sam knew that Jake could be angry with him. He'd seen it enough times with other guys to know that when you put a woman between two men,

Finally, it was five of noon, and Sam walked down the street to the diner. He got there before Jake and welcomed the chance to compose himself. A waitress sat him in a booth; the red vinyl seats next to the window were positioned so that Sam could see Jake coming from down the block. He thought about what he would say to Jake when he got there. He couldn't center on one emotion. Anger, embarrassment, shame and regret all swirled around, amorphous and irreconcilable.

Then he saw Jake walking down the sidewalk, his head down. In a matter of seconds, Jake would be there and Sam finally would know what he would say. In a moment of welcome certainty, Sam steeled himself and decided that he shouldn't have to say anything. He knew he didn't do anything wrong and he didn't have anything to answer for. It was Jake who needed to do the talking, and that's what Sam was going to let him do.

Jake entered the diner door and looked around, before he spotted Sam. He walked toward the booth slowly, as if each step hurt him. When he reached the booth, he slid in across from Sam.

“Hey,” he said, then looked out the window.

Sam just nodded back.

The waitress came back and handed them both menus and took their drink orders. Jake immediately opened his menu, and his eyes scanned up and down each page. It was clear to Sam that Jake was going to wait until they had ordered to talk about whatever he wanted to say. The anticipation was getting to Sam, and he could feel himself tensing up again. He looked back to the kitchen, and could see the waitress just standing there, and he wished she would hurry up.

Finally, she came out with a notepad. When she left, Sam sat in anticipation, waiting to hear what Jake had to say. Jake just looked out the window again. Sam couldn't wait any longer. Jake was delaying the inevitable and holding Sam's emotions hostage, and it caused Sam to focus on just one of those emotions – anger. “What did you want to say?” It came out short, clipped, belying his frustration.

Jake snapped his head back toward Sam, like he was waking up from a daydream. “I just wanted to again say I'm sorry for what I did.”

Sam's tight muscles immediately loosened, but he could feel the anger grow a little bit more, in the form of heat rising up in his chest. He tried to control it, but he blurted out, “Why did you do that?” He regretted the question immediately. He knew why he'd done it.

Jake sighed. “Part of it is that I'm jealous of you.”

Sam was stunned. Of all the things he had imagined Jake would say, that wasn't one of them. It disarmed him, but at the same time, he felt like someone had uncorked



him at let all the steamy anger out. “What? Why would you be jealous of me?”

“Because you don’t let anything affect you. You seem so calm about everything, all the time. I envy that in you, and when I saw you on the couch with Isobel, I thought she would like that in you too, and that she would be interested more in you than me.”

Sam was flabbergasted. Just a few nights earlier, he was attending a party of someone he didn’t even like because he had no other options, and now this person was telling him that he was jealous of him. He was going to admit as much to Jake, but then reconsidered. “I was wondering why you had even invited me. I thought you were just inviting everyone you knew from work, but I don’t think I saw anyone else from the office there.”

“No, you were the only one. I don’t really like the other people at the office. They’re pretty fake.”

“I think that, too, about the workers upstairs. The thing is, I thought you were one of them.”

Jake laughed, looking down at his argyle sweater vest. “Well, I try to fit in because doing otherwise would be detrimental to my career. But no one I hang out with is like those people.”

“I’m surprised to hear that.” He looked at Jake and wondered how he could be so wrong about someone. For as long as he had known him, Sam thought Jake was pompous and insincere, but it turned out it was just an act. Now Jake was being so forthcoming, Sam let down his guard and told him the truth. “The only reason I came to your party is because I had nothing else to do. As a matter of fact, the only reason I was on the couch

with your girlfriend is because I had no one to talk to at the party.”

Jake tilted his head, perplexed by Sam’s admission.

Sam continued. “Even worse, the only other person I talked to at the party was a guy who turned out to be hitting on me.”

Jake smiled. “That doesn’t change the fact that I owe you an apology. I asked her about what happened the next day, and she went ballistic on me, accusing me of siding with you. I thought it was strange the way she reacted – I didn’t say anything except, ‘So, what happened last night?’ – so I talked to a few other people at the party who saw what happened. They all said that Isobel overreacted. It pretty much confirmed to me that she was out of line. So I broke up with her and I want to try to make it right with you. So here I am. I’m really sorry what happened. I was drunk and I thought I had to defend my girlfriend, but I should’ve known that you wouldn’t do something like what she accused you of. Is there any way I can make it up to you?”

“Yeah. Invite me to your next party.” Sam reached his hand across the table, and the two men shook hands.

## STANDING ON HIS OWN

Owen brewed a pot of coffee, filling their two-bedroom apartment with the smell, just like he had each morning for the last six months. While Owen ironed his shirt and pants, Harrison had an extra 20 minutes to wake up and get ready, which he used all of and more on most days. From the breakfast bar in the kitchen, Owen could see dress shirts, khakis and shoes strewn about in front of Harrison's door. He shook his head and moved on to brushing the lint off his slacks and adjusting the knot of his tie in the mirror.

From behind Harrison's door, Owen couldn't hear any movement. "Get up," he yelled, then knocked again. "We don't have time to do this again, Harrison!" Owen checked his watch, calculating that they had 13 minutes to get out the door if they were going to make it to work on time. Owen threw the door open then violently shook Harrison's shoulder. Harrison's voice came out from under the sheets. "Five more minutes."

"C'mon, man, we don't have five minutes to spare." Owen shoved the lump under the sheets. "Get up, get up, get up! We're going to be late again."

"Okay, okay. I'll be ready in like five minutes." Harrison slid out of bed, his body loose like he was being poured out.

Owen went out the kitchen to wait for Harrison to get ready. He checked email on his BlackBerry. Owen heard the shower turn on, and hoped that the water would rinse the cigarettes and stale beer off Harrison, but he knew that it didn't matter, because Owen

knew Harrison would just stumble out of the bathroom and picked the cleanest-looking pair of pants and shirt from off the floor.

Sixteen minutes later, Harrison opened the door and stepped out into the living room, his shirt wrinkled and untucked. Owen handed him a travel mug full of hot coffee and a package of brown sugar Pop Tarts for the walk to work. The walk to work took 14 minutes when Owen took it alone -- the days when Harrison just “wasn’t feeling well” or just “couldn’t get out of bed.” It took just over 22 minutes when Harrison and Owen took it together, Owen trying to pick up the pace while Harrison dragged behind. When they got to work, they slipped into the elevator. Owen pressed the button for the third floor, junior accounts; Harrison, the one for the eighth, the big money.

###

Owen moved to Springbock, N.Y., in the middle of the year in second grade. He’d left behind a few friends in Long Island, but mostly he was a shy kid who had trouble socializing. So it was especially terrifying on his first day at his new school when Ms. Mulrew asked the class if anyone was willing to share their snack with him, and no one raised their hand. Owen scanned the classroom, unable to make eye contact with any of the students, hoping that someone would raise their arm and offer reprieve from the growing embarrassment he felt. Finally, a hand popped up. Owen sat down next to Harrison, who handed him a strawberry Fruit Rollup. When Ms. Mulrew turned her back, Harrison yanked Tommy Loncarich’s Pop Tarts out of his hands. Harrison stuffed one

his mouth as Tommy yelled out to Ms. Mulrew, but when he asked Owen if Harrison had stolen Tommy's snack, Owen denied it. Harrison and Owen had been friends ever since.

A few days later Harrison saw Owen riding his bike down his street, and it turned out they lived less than a mile from each other. They started riding bikes together every day until it turned cold, then they moved inside, playing marathon sessions of video game hockey. At school, because Harrison's – Mullin – and Owen's – McNaughton – last names started with the same letter, they always were in homeroom together and often sat next to each other in class, unless the teacher separated them because they were disruptive. In high school, they became even closer friends. In the fall of ninth grade, they became the first freshmen to make the varsity soccer team in the school's history.

It was something that happened between Owen's parents that solidified his relationship with Harrison. When Owen was 15, his coach cancelled soccer practice the day after a nice win over their rivals. He arrived home to find the back door of the house wide open. In the kitchen, the linoleum floor was slippery and chunks of glass crunched under Owen's sneakers. The room smelled of what Owen thought was rubbing alcohol. Owen was used to cleaning up after his father, so he went about sweeping up. Before he had the chance, he heard a crash, like a dresser falling on its side, followed by a muffled scream.

Upstairs, Owen found his mother lying on the floor next to her bed, blood trickling from her nose and abrasions on her cheek. The white duvet cover was stained with red streaks. Owen started to move toward her to help her, but she waved him away. "Get out of here, Owen!"

Owen, breathing hard from leaping up the steps three at a time, ignored her and

stepped closer, reaching out his hand to help her up. “What happened?”

“I’m fine, Owen.” From down the hall, they could hear what sounded like someone rummaging through a pile of heavy equipment. Owen’s mother looked up at him, clenched her jaw and screamed at him, “Get the fuck out of here!”

Owen had never heard his mom swear before. She hated swearing, so much so that on the odd occasion that Owen let a curse slip, she would make his father cuff him on the ear with his massive hands. Owen’s ear would throb with heat for days afterward. Now, his mother was swearing at him. It disconcerted him, and he hesitantly took a few steps back from his mother.

The sound of heavy feet on the hardwood floors in the hallway approached. Owen, still looking at his mother, saw her face morph from anger to fear. Her eyes widened as if she were on train tracks, watching a locomotive come right at her. That look convinced Owen that he had to stay. He turned and steeled himself, clenching his fists and waiting for his father to appear in the doorway. He knew he didn’t have much of a chance against his father, who was four inches taller and had at least 40 pounds on him, but he figured he could get in the way long enough – or better yet, kick him hard enough – to delay his progress and allow his mother to escape.

Then Owen felt a pair of hands on his lower back, shoving him forward. He stumbled forward, losing his balance and tumbling into the hallway. He turned to see his mother slam the door, and then he heard the lock click. Without looking, Owen could feel his father bearing down on him, so he bounced up and took the steps three at a time. He ran out of the house, into the street and down the block. He ran to the only place he could

think of: Harrison's house. Owen pounded on the door until Harrison opened it. Owen slid past Harrison and grabbed the first phone he saw, dialing 911. After the dispatcher took his information and hung up, Owen was left holding the phone. He didn't know what to do next. Harrison, having heard the call, came over and grabbed the phone and guided Owen to the couch. Owen, stunned, sat still for a few moments, then looked up and asked, "Can I stay here tonight?"

Harrison stayed up with Owen the whole night, continually dialing and redialing Owen's home number, but no one answered. Finally, Owen's mom called the next day. Mrs. Mullin answered, and when she hung up she called Owen into the kitchen. She told him he could stay as long as he needed. He ended up staying three more weeks, sleeping in a bag on the floor of Harrison's room. When he finally went home, his father wasn't there. Owen didn't see his dad again until the trial.

###

After college, Owen and Harrison got jobs working in sales for a consulting firm specializing in providing research on best-practice solutions for computer software companies. Essentially, their company came into other companies, took a look at how they did things, did some research on how they could do those things better and then helped them do it better.

Owen and Harrison both liked the job immediately, because of its competitive nature. All the salesmen sat in cubicles, making phone calls and setting up visits with

potential clients. Their cubicles all faced the same way, toward a massive, floor-to-ceiling white board with all their names on it and three numbers underneath each name: total visits booked, total clients signed and total dollars brought in.

The white board served as a constant reminder of where everyone stood. There was no faking it when your numbers were right there for everyone to see, and for Owen and Harrison – two former collegiate soccer players – the board was like a stat sheet listing their goals and assists on the pitch. It was even better, though, because the higher the numbers went on the white board, the bigger their paychecks were.

After a few years of learning the system – how to speak to clients to make it seem they would be stupid not to use the services their company offered, when to follow up phone calls with a friendly email, what to say when a client was thinking of not renewing their contract – Owen and Harrison were some of the best salesmen in the company. In their fifth year, they consistently put up the best numbers on the white board.

In the last six months, though, Owen had pulled away from Harrison. From the moment Owen sat down at work, he was on the phones, setting up new visits and making sure that his current clients were happy. Meanwhile, Harrison would often spend the first hour of the day playing solitaire, slowly recovering from a late night.

When a position in management opened up, Owen applied and got the job. The company gave Owen an office on the eighth floor with a view, while Harrison continued to stare at the gray cubicle walls. He regretted leaving Harrison downstairs, but the job offered more guaranteed money and he still would get residuals from the clients he signed.



Owen's new job required longer hours, so while he and Harrison walked to work together each morning, Owen often didn't see Harrison again until the next morning.

When Owen got home each night at 6:00 or 7:00, sometimes even 8:00, Harrison wasn't home. Sometimes, Owen would hear Harrison come in during the night, shutting the door a little too loudly, tripping over shoes he left out in the living room. Many times, Owen would wake up to the sound of two voices, and think they were getting robbed, until he realized it was just a girl Harrison had convinced to come home with him. The late-night wake-up calls got more frequent.

It also was more common for Owen to knock on Harrison's door and hear either an excuse why he wasn't going to work that day – "My stomach's a bit queasy, O-face" or "Don't think I can do it, man" – or nothing at all. Owen's walk to work was quicker on those days, but that didn't provide him any solace.

On a day Harrison was out sick, Owen got a call from his old boss, Mr. Linkiewicz, asking him to come down to his office. Owen suspected he knew what was coming. Harrison had been missing more days of work lately, and he'd been out for three days straight.

"I wanted to talk to you about Harrison. I'm not even supposed to be talking to you about this. It's against company policy to discuss personnel matters with someone other than the employee or HR, but I figured since you were so close, you might be able to help. I assume you know what's been going on with him?"

Owen knew what Linkiewicz was referring to, but he was hesitant to point out Harrison's behavior, in the event that he was wrong. So he played coy. "No, not really.

What's up?"

"Well, besides the sick days -- he's at his max, by the way -- he shows up late to meetings, he's generally unresponsive when asked to contribute, short with coworkers, and worst of all, he's been a jerk to a few of his clients."

Owen wasn't aware that Harrison's behavior had started trickling down to his work. When they were still working on the same floor together, Owen was able to look over Harrison's shoulder and get on him if he wasn't performing. As of six months ago, when Owen got his promotion, Harrison was still at the top of the white board in sales.

Link continued his litany of complaints about Harrison's work. After a few minutes, he finally looked Owen in the eye and said, "It's like he's a different person, Owen. What's going on?"

"Yeah, I know, Link. He's been a bit wild lately. I've been trying to get him to calm down, maybe be a little more responsible."

Linkiewicz slowly walked behind his desk and sat down in front of the mountain of papers.

"What do you want me to do, Link?"

"Just send the message, Owen," Linkiewicz said, adding, "but this conversation didn't happen." Link turned in his chair to face his computer screen. It was his not-so-subtle way of indicating a conversation was over. Owen walked out without saying good-bye.

###

Owen handed Harrison a travel mug full of coffee and a bagel and opened the door for him. His watch read 8:14 and Owen closed the door behind them. He knew they'd have to hurry to get to work on time, but he had planned on talking to Harrison on the way and he wasn't sure how long that would take. Owen figured it was worth it to be late today, if that's what it took.

Owen tried to slow his pace on the walk to work, but Harrison still kept falling behind. Owen wasn't sure how to bring up what Linkiewicz had said yesterday to Harrison without making it obvious that his superiors were breathing down his neck. Link had told him not to tell anyone about their conversation, but more than that, Owen felt like telling Harrison about what Link had said might put him under further stress and make the problem even worse than it already was. He thought maybe he could question his maturity, something that always was being called into question for Harrison, much to his chagrin.

"Hey, 'son, do you think maybe you should cut back a bit on your partying?"

"Why would I want to do that?"

"Aren't you tired of it?"

Harrison cocked his head. "Are you crazy? I'm 30 years old, making bank and getting strange three nights a week. You know how many guys want to be me?"

Owen scoffed. "Yeah, a bunch of 24-year-old salesmen think you're awesome. But that was a long time ago for us."

"A long time ago? C'mon, man, it was only six years ago. You act like we're 40, or something." Owen shook his head. "We're single, making good money and we're still

young. Maybe you should loosen up and try living a little bit, O-face. Or, maybe you're just," Harrison paused for a second, "*jealous*."

Owen had prepared for Harrison to be a bit hostile, but he wasn't ready for his best friend to take shots. The way Harrison said the word hit Owen like he'd been jolted with electricity, which ignited a snap anger that he couldn't contain. "You're right, Harrison. I *am* jealous. I'm jealous that I can't just skate along like you are, partying all the time without caring about how it affects the other people in your life. I'm jealous that I don't have the option inside me to let people down. Yeah, I'm jealous of that, but that's not what this is about, you idiot."

Harrison smirked.

"It's *about* you throwing it all away. You've got a good job and girls love you, man. You could get any job you want, and girl you want ..."

Harrison laughed. "I *do* get any girl I want."

Owen was on the verge of losing it, so he pulled back to compose himself. After a deep breath, he said, "Yeah, you get all the girls you want, but they're all one-night stands. And you could get a better job, maybe upstairs with me. Instead, you're just floating along in a stupor downstairs. Don't you want something more than that? Isn't it just so empty? Aren't you tired of feeling like shit in the mornings?"

"No, I'm not. I like my life, and I like deciding for myself how my life goes. If I get into a relationship, that just means that someone else is weighing in on what I can do and how I can do it. If I get a job upstairs with you, it means I have to tell other people how to do their jobs. I *like* not having to do that. I like that my job now only depends

on whether I sell or not. Nothing else matters. Right now, no one decides how well I'm doing my job, and I like it that way. It's just that number up on the white board that says how well I'm doing."

As a manager, Owen knew what Harrison's numbers were, and they weren't heading north. In meetings with other managers over the last few months, Owen several times had to make excuses for Harrison's declining numbers. He was running out of fictional relatives to kill off and made-up maladies. "How's that number doing, Harrison?"

Harrison's shoulders dropped and his lips, which had been curled into a smirk, were pursed. "You know I've been down lately, Owen. I just can't seem to motivate myself anymore. Come on, Owen, why'd you have to bring my numbers up?"

Owen immediately felt bad for bringing up Harrison's sales stats. He knew it was a sensitive spot for Harrison. Three weeks earlier, Owen had come home one night to find Harrison on the couch in the living room. Surprised, Owen sat down next to him and asked if everything was all right. Harrison confided in Owen that he was having trouble, and although he never used the words "depression" or "depressed," Owen could tell that Harrison was more than just bummed out.

Owen thought maybe if he mentioned his conversation with Linkiewicz, Harrison would understand why he brought up the sales figures, but Owen remembered that he had promised not to say anything. He put his head down and silently walked the rest of the way to work, Harrison following behind.

###

Owen's strategy didn't work. Now he just felt bad that he'd put Harrison in a worse place than before. Still, Owen knew that he had to do something soon, because Link wouldn't wait around for a long-term solution. Whatever Owen was going to do had to be fast. He figured his best shot, at this point, was to try to limit Harrison's partying. And the only way to do that, he surmised, was to go to the problem.

For months, Harrison had tried to get Owen to "loosen up" and come out to one happy hour or another, or some "crazy party" filled with women. "You can't always be a tool, O-face. Come have a drink with us, just one, and I'll show you how much fun it is." So Owen went to happy hour one day after work, and just watched. He tried to count Harrison's drinks, but it seemed as if his glass was never empty. In college, they used to joke that you "only had one" if you never saw the bottom of your glass. The joke wasn't funny now.

Owen didn't want to make it too obvious that he was there just to watch over Harrison, so he had a few drinks himself. The first coworkers started filtering out at about 6:30 p.m. Owen figured others would start to follow and thought they could be out of the bar by 8 p.m. Sure enough, every other coworker was gone by then, but Harrison was still at the bar, talking to a woman, a drink in his hand. Owen figured he'd wait until Harrison was done with his drink and then he'd suggest heading home. But when Owen looked over 15 minutes later, Harrison's drink was full. The only thing new was the woman he was talking to.

By 10 p.m., when the place smelled like faded cologne mixed with sweat, Owen was restless. He walked to the bar, where Harrison was engrossed in conversation with

a bleach-blonde woman with long, pink nails and matching lipstick. She flipped her hair over a shoulder, ran her fingers through it, pulling it forward, and then she did it again. Owen stepped between Harrison and the woman. "Let's go," Owen said, tired enough not to care that he had just interrupted Harrison's conversation.

Harrison leaned around Owen and leaned in to Owen's ear. "What're you doing? You're ruining my chance with this girl."

Owen wiped the spittle from his ear and looked back at the woman, who smiled at him to reveal teeth well on their way to being the color of a UPS driver's uniform. "Let's just go, all right?"

"No way, O. I'm sticking this one out. If you wait a few minutes, I think I can get her to leave with us."

Owen pictured the awkward good nights they would say when the three of them arrived home. "I'm leaving. You coming or staying?"

Harrison pushed Owen out of the way. "See you later."

###

A second attempt to limit Harrison's intake left Owen's bank account \$120 lighter and further cost him some good will at work. Owen went to happy hour with Harrison for a second straight night, this time hoping that he could control the flow of alcohol to Harrison by telling him that drinks were on him that night. He had failed the night before to determine how much Harrison was drinking, so at least this way he would have a record

of it. What Owen didn't account for is that each drink he bought Harrison came with another drink for him. Having nothing else to do besides watch Harrison bounce from woman to woman, Owen lost track of his own drinking.

A searing light shining through the bedroom window woke Owen the next morning. It felt as if his brain was loose in his head. Every time he moved it slammed from one side of his skull to the other. He rolled over and looked at his alarm clock: 9:40 a.m. He and Harrison already were more than an hour late. He threw the covers off and jumped up, yelling out for Harrison. When Owen finally made it to his desk at work, he checked his bank account. He'd spent almost \$120 on drinks the night before. The strategy wasn't working, and Owen's headache was proof of that. It was only dragging Owen down with Harrison.

Owen was at a loss, discomfited by both the feeling that he was unable to achieve his goal of staunching the flow of alcohol to Harrison and that he couldn't fix his friend. Both feelings were foreign to him; he'd known nearly nothing but success in his professional life, and he'd prided himself on his ability to help others. He knew he had to help Harrison, but he was flummoxed about how.

The answer came to him on their walk to work. Harrison was shuffling along so slowly that Owen was forced to physically push him to speed up. When Owen came within a few feet of Harrison, he noticed the smell of liquor and cigarettes was overwhelming. Owen knew that Harrison sometimes grabbed clothes off the floor when he was in a hurry in the morning, but he thought they at least were clean clothes that he just hadn't folded yet. "You smell."



Harrison shrugged.

“Don’t people at work say anything to you?”

“Who cares? Clients can’t smell me over the phone. What do you care, anyway? You can’t smell me up on the eighth floor.”

When Owen got home from work that night, and while Harrison was still at happy hour, he gathered up all the dirty clothes in Harrison’s room. He made sure to keep them separate from his own clothing by putting them in different drawstring bags. Owen then lugged both bags down the street to Mrs. Trung’s Cleaners, asking -- and paying extra— for a rush job. At \$3.50 per pound plus the rush fee, Owen dropped a decent-sized chunk of cash, mostly for Harrison’s clothes, but he figured it was worth it. He picked them up later that night and dropped Harrison’s neatly folded clothes next to his dresser. While he was in the room, he also thought of another way to make sure Harrison could look better at work. Owen walked over to Harrison’s alarm clock and reset it 20 minutes fast.

The next morning, Owen knocked on Harrison’s door. “C’mon, man, we’re late. Hurry up!” Owen felt a bit guilty for getting pleasure out of tricking Harrison into getting to work on time. He cracked open the door and yelled, “Hurry up, man! We’re late!” Harrison sat up in bed and looked over at the clock. He immediately jumped out of bed and ran to the shower.

“Give me five minutes,” Harrison said, running into his bathroom.

Fifteen minutes later, after Owen slowly enjoyed a bowl of cereal while scrolling through his emails on his BlackBerry, Harrison stepped out into the living room, dressed in freshly pressed slacks and a button-down. He had a confused look on his face.

“Did you do my laundry, Owen?”

Owen nodded.

“Why the hell are you doing my laundry, dude? You don’t have to do that.”

“Figured I’ve got room in the washer and there’s no sense wasting all that water for just a few things. Might as well fill it up, right?”

“I guess so, but I feel like you’re my maid or something.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Owen said. He held off saying, “You could say thank you.”

###

Harrison’s sales figures stabilized, though they weren’t where they once had been. He was showing up to work on time smelling and looking presentable. Harrison either didn’t notice or didn’t care that his clock was wrong. His timeliness and cleanliness were enough to avoid suspicion from his managers. Owen was surprised at just how well his plan was working. Even Mr. Linkiewicz noticed, and sent Owen an email, thanking him for “straightening Harrison out.”

The renaissance didn’t last. A week later, Harrison sent Owen an email asking if he wanted to go to lunch with him and a few guys from accounting over at Lucky’s, a bar not too far from the office more known for having Pabst Blue Ribbon on draught than for its lunch fare. An hour-and-a-half later, there was a knock on Owen’s office door. Owen pulled the door open, and Harrison just stood there, smiling. Owen wondered what he

was doing up on the eighth floor; Harrison hadn't visited Owen's office since his promotion.

"Thanks for coming to lunch, jerk. You missed a good time. A real good time."

"Sorry, I had a bunch of work to do. Come on in."

Harrison took three steps in and dropped himself into the chair in front of Owen's desk. Before he could sit himself, Owen got a distinct whiff of whiskey. "What did you have for lunch?"

"Me and the guys went for some cheeseburgers." Harrison slumped in the chair. Owen noticed his face was flush.

"What guys?" In all his time working there, Owen had never seen Harrison go out to lunch with anyone in the company other than him.

"You know, the guys." Harrison twirled his finger in the air. "The salesmen."

"Which ones?"

Harrison sat up a little in the chair. "Why do you care?"

Owen sniffed. "I just don't think you went out for cheeseburgers."

"Whatever. I had a drink or two at Lucky's. You know, liquid lunch and all. No harm done."

Owen grabbed Harrison's arm and dragging him to the lobby and the bathroom next to the concierge's desk. Inside, next to the sink Owen knew there was mouthwash, put there for people who were coming for interviews. He filled a cup and handed it to Harrison. "Swish this around in your mouth, dude."

"What for?"

“Are you kidding me? You smell like St. Patrick’s Day. How much did you have to drink?”

*“How much did you have to drink? You sound like my mother, Owen.”*

“Yeah, well, I’m getting really tired of being your mother. You’re 30, and yet I have to wake you up every morning and make sure you make it to work on time. I make you coffee, I drag your ass out of bed. I do your laundry for you!”

“Screw you. I don’t need your help, so just quit it. I take care of myself, thank you very much.”

Owen opened his mouth to yell back at Harrison, but nothing came out. Instead, he opened the door to the bathroom and left Harrison inside. He walked to his secretary’s desk and told her he wasn’t feeling well and that he was taking the rest of the day off. Before she could say anything, Owen walked away, took the elevator down to the first floor and left the building.

####

Owen had stayed away from the apartment as long as he could. His anger had worn off hours before, but his fear of an awkward confrontation kept him sitting in a sports bar hours longer than necessary, watching a baseball game on the television above the bar as the bartender, tired of refilling his Diet Coke, ignored him. Finally, the lights came on and Owen knew he no longer had a choice in the matter. He slapped a few dollars on the bar, grabbed his jacket and began the walk home.

As he walked, he began imagining how the conversation between he and Harrison would go. He felt like he should apologize, but for what he wasn't sure. "I'm the one doing the right thing here," he thought. "Why the heck should I have to apologize?" But the feeling nagged at him, if only because it was the only way he knew how to start the conversation, and maybe the only way to ensure that Harrison returned with the apology that Owen deserved. "I'm sorry if I offended you, but I'm worried about you," Owen thought of saying, but it sounded like he was talking down to Harrison. "I'm sorry, man. I was just trying to help ..." Owen was in a position he'd never before been in with Harrison. They'd never been so angry at each other, not at least to the point one of them walked away from the other. Sure, they'd had fights before, but mostly over insignificant things, like who should do the dishes or who owed more on the tab, the answer to which was always Harrison. This, however, had escalated to a new level and Owen just wanted it to go away.

As he rounded the corner to their apartment building, dual feelings crept up inside Owen. On one hand, he hoped he and Harrison could just have at it tonight and get it over with and move on. On the other, he hoped Harrison was out at a bar or just asleep so that he could put off the awkwardness for a few more hours. Owen climbed up the steps to their apartment and quietly inserted the lock in the key and as he entered the apartment, it appeared as if his second wish was true. The apartment was pitch-black and silent. Harrison was either out, or asleep.

Not wanting to take a chance of waking him up if he was asleep, Owen tiptoed through the living room, carefully choosing his steps so as not to run into anything. As he

reached his door, he heard a noise behind him and he froze.

“Ooon.” The sound was soft as a whisper and sounded almost guttural. It was so soft that Owen thought maybe he was just being paranoid and hearing things. He opened his door and kicked off his shoes, sat down and start getting ready for bed. But then he heard it again, this time louder.

“Ooon. Oooooonnnn.” What Owen heard next was unmistakable: the sound of retching, then vomit spewing and hitting the floor. He rushed out into the living room, flipped the lights on and found Harrison laying on the floor, underneath what used to be their glassed-paned coffee table. Now the table had no top; its glass was shattered into hundreds of tiny pieces, and Harrison lay amidst the shining shards covered in blood and puke. He had a large gash that stretched from the middle of his forehead down over his nose.

“Jesus, Harrison, what the fuck happened to you?”

Harrison didn’t answer; he could only grunt. Owen kneeled down next to him, careful not to cut his knee up on the glass. As he did, Harrison began to retch again and Owen turned away, but it was too late. Foul-smelling vomit the color of whiskey and bile erupted from Harrison’s mouth and splashed off Owen’s khakis.

Owen was equal parts pissed off and concerned. The pissed-off part of him wanted to just leave Harrison lying there to fend for himself. After all, he put himself in this situation and he could get his own damn self out of it. The concerned part worried that Harrison could have alcohol poisoning and that the gash in his head could have caused enough blood loss to be dangerous, or at the very least warrant stitches.

The concerned part won. Neither owned a car, so Owen called a cab. First, though, he grabbed a few towels from the closet outside the bathroom and wet them under the sink, wiping Harrison's face clean. As they waited for the cab, Owen found some ratty sweatpants and a t-shirt from Harrison's room. He dragged Harrison into the kitchen, wiped him down with the towels and yanked his dirty clothes off. As Owen attempted to put the sweatpants and t-shirt on, Harrison woke up briefly and started squirming.

"Goddammit, sit still, Harrison. Just let me put this stuff on you."

Minutes later, after dragging Harrison down three flights of steps, the cab pulled up. The driver initially protested Owen putting Harrison in the front seat, but when Owen explained that he needed to go to the hospital -- and that he'd tip him generously if he'd just hurry up -- the cabbie relented.

###

The next morning, Owen called in sick to work -- for both of them. He told Link that Harrison had been in an accident, but declined to give any further details. He told his secretary that he still wasn't feeling well.

During the night, Owen had dozed in and out of sleep in the rock-hard chair next to Harrison's hospital bed. Owen hadn't slept much in the seven hours since they'd arrived at the hospital, with doctors and nurses coming in and out of the room and asking him questions about what had happened to Harrison. Owen didn't have many answers for them, only that he had found Harrison in this condition in their apartment. After he and

Harrison arrived at the emergency room the night before, the doctors had pumped Harrison's stomach and sewn up the gash in his forehead. Harrison was left with a Frankenstein-looking stitch job.

One of the physicians asking questions during the night had worried Owen. The doctor came into the room, looked at Harrison's chart, shook his head and asked, "Does this often, eh?"

"What do you mean?"

The physician looked at Owen over the chart, shook his head and said, "Looks like this is the third time in the last few months that he's had his stomach pumped. Your friend here has a problem."

Owen wondered how he could not have noticed. He tried to remember a time that Harrison wasn't there in the morning. He couldn't recall a morning when Harrison wasn't there, but there must have been. There must have been a few days where he just gave up after knocking on Harrison's door without any answer. He sat down in the chair again, exhausted, and dozed off.

When Owen woke up, an orderly was in the room bringing Harrison breakfast. Harrison was sitting up in bed, smiling and chatting with the orderly, a cute blonde girl not old enough to be out of college. As Owen sat up, Harrison noticed and turned to him.

"Hey buddy, how you feeling this morning?"

"I should be asking you that."

"I'm just great, though I hear from Allison here," Harrison nodded toward the orderly, who smiled at Owen, "that my forehead is not too becoming."



“Yeah, well, you should’ve seen yourself last night. What the heck did you do last night?” Owen straightened up in his chair.

Harrison shrugged. “Beats me. Last thing I recall, you were slamming the bathroom door in my face. Then I woke up to Allison’s pretty little face shoving breakfast onto the tray in front of me. So, you tell me, what the heck *did* I do last night?”

Owen couldn’t believe it. The anger started creeping up in his chest. Here he sat, sore and tired from sleeping in a wooden chair all night, and the man who he pulled up out of puddles of his own vomit and blood the night before was feeling positively giddy to be flirting with a girl.

“All I know is that in the six hours that I left you alone, you managed to rack up a 0.24 blood-alcohol content, bash your head off a glass coffee table and then vomit all over yourself. By the time I got there, the damage was done, so I dragged your dumb ass here and they proceeded to pump your stomach and sew you up.”

“Huh.” Harrison again shrugged and went back to flirting with Allison.

“Huh? That’s it?” Owen stood up and started to leave the room, but then thought better of it. He turned to the orderly and asked her to leave.

Harrison seemed surprised. “What’s up, buddy?”

Owen could feel the tendons in his neck strain and the blood rush to his face. He was tired and sore from staying up all night, while Harrison acted as if he’d had a great night’s sleep and that he no worries. Owen had enough concern inside him for the both of them and that worry was about to spill over in the form of hot, angry words. But then something clicked inside Owen. Suddenly, he was calm. He looked at Harrison and

saw the previous night's events playing out countless times in the future, time after time Harrison screwing up and he cleaning up after him, only to watch Harrison do it again a month, a week, a day later.

Owen had gone out of his way to try to help Harrison, without asking for anything in return. He'd tried everything he could think of to help. He'd spent more money on Harrison's laundry over the last few months than he did on himself combined. He'd run interference for Harrison when other managers mentioned his cavalier approach to work and his declining output. He'd acted as his alarm clock, his maid, his cook and his wallet. Owen realized that nearly his entire focus had become making sure Harrison was functioning. He thought about how many hours he spent each day wondering whether Harrison he was doing something dumb, or about how he could make sure Harrison kept his job. He saw the fruitlessness of his effort. It wasn't getting any better.

It seemed like such a long time ago to him that Harrison had been a big brother figure who stood up for him. Now Owen wondered if Harrison could stand up on his own. Or, worse yet, if he could stand alone, unburden him from the guilt of even thinking such a thing. He wondered where he would've gone, back when he was 15 and his dad was raging, if Harrison hadn't given him a place to sleep, to feel safe. He wondered if his mother would have taken him and run, and what that would have been like, knowing that he didn't need to know because Harrison *had* let him in. Now, for the first time, he began to wonder if everything would have been better if Harrison had just shut his door.

He knew that thought must have been there before, but he never let himself feel it. Like the word that's on the tip of your tongue that finally falls back, forming in your

mouth and exiting, only after you've tried and tried to grab on to it, Owen felt his chest wrapping around this idea that it was Harrison who he wanted to be rid of. He felt the weight he'd been carrying, making sure that Harrison was okay. It was like he literally was lifting Harrison, and had been for months, maybe years, and the burden finally was just getting to be too much.

"Maybe I'll see you later." Then he turned and walked out the door.

Harrison called after him. "Where you going?"

###

Owen's alarm buzzed three times, until he reached over and snapped it off. He swung his legs out from under the sheets and sat up, still groggy from sleep. He stood up, walked to the kitchen and started his morning routine: flip on the coffee maker, shower, iron shirt and slacks, pick out a pair of shoes.

As Owen drank his coffee and checked his emails, he thought back to how long his routine had remained unchanged, how many times this same scene of him waking Harrison up for him to rush to get ready, waiting for him and dragging him to work. He recalled the freedom he felt on the days when Harrison called in sick, his quick pace -- unburdened by Harrison -- to the office and the extra minutes he had in the morning to himself to prepare for the day.

He felt that freedom. He sat at the kitchen table, sipping his coffee and reading the newspaper. He looked at the clock on the microwave. He took his time with his tasks, lin-

gering under the hot shower for a few extra minutes, slowly toweling off and then making sure his pants and shirt were pristine. The things he cared about seemed so much more important.

Owen knew it wasn't about his own freedom, though. It was about what Harrison needed. It was about what Owen was doing to him by helping him, and what Harrison wasn't seeing because of Owen's help. Owen knew that he allowed Harrison to function; he was like a child who needed a parent. Today, Harrison was going to have to learn how to crawl again.

When he was finally ready, Owen stepped over a ratty sweatshirt on the floor and grabbed his coat. He walked toward his bedroom door, then pulled it shut. On the way out of the apartment, he looked back at Harrison's door, knowing that he was still inside the room, sleeping. He shut the door and walked to work, alone.

## FEAR OF HEIGHT

My name is Neil, and I'm 7'4". But that's not what I want to tell you about. That's usually the first thing people notice about me, so I've resigned myself to that fact and it's the first thing I tell people. Well, mostly because it's the first thing people ask me. "How *tall* are you?" And then I say, "I'm 7'4". And they say, "Holy cow!" Some people swear at me, so I tell them it's not nice to swear, that Christians don't swear, and they usually give me some weird look. "Well, it's true," I say, and I think, "It *is* true. Good Christians don't swear. It hurts God's ears."

That's not what I want to tell you about, though. I want to tell you about the girl I met on the train a few years back, the girl who asked me about my greatest fear. This girl walks right up to me on the train and starts staring at me intently. When people are looking at me on the train, I try to ignore them, because usually they're just staring at me because I'm 7'4".

But anyway, this girl is walking toward me and looking right at me, or at least I think she's looking at me, because I got that feeling you get, the one when someone's looking at you. So I looked up, and there's this girl looking at me, right in the eye, and she's not looking at me like most people look at me. She's looking at me like I'm human, just another guy on the train. So she looks at me, and I'm thinking that it's weird that she's looking at me like that, because I'm 7'4". So, she's looking at me with these eyes,

big brown eyes, real warm, like a pool of chocolate pudding, and those eyes reminded me of my mother's eyes, mostly I think because she's the only other person that's looked at me like that, but she doesn't look at me like that anymore, because, well, she passed a few years ago.

I should tell you about my mother. She's a good lady. Well, she *was* a good lady. Real warm-hearted, you know? The kind of lady that made you feel whole and warm when she hugs you ... and her hugs were amazing. She was a big lady and all, and when she'd hug you, she'd wrap you up like a Christmas present, but more warm ... more like a coat or something. And she always smelled like vanilla. She had this perfume that reminded me of ice cream, but warm, sort of like when you have ice cream on the side of warm pie and the warmth of the pie melts the ice cream so that the taste is ... well, warm. Like that girl on the train.

So, yeah, the girl, the one with the warm eyes, she looks right at me and says, "What is your greatest fear?" And I didn't really know what to say to that. I don't think anybody has ever asked me before, so I wasn't really prepared for the question. So, I just said to her, "I don't know. Why do you want to know?" And she says, "I just want to know." Turns out she's been asking everybody on the train, which considering it was just before six in the morning wasn't too many people. But anyway, she'd been asking everybody on the train, going between cars and asking people who are just barely waking up what their greatest fears are. I'd imagine that probably upset a bunch of people. I think I'd've been upset, too, but I'm a Christian and all, and it's not like we Christians to get all that mad at people. Besides, she had those eyes, those warm eyes that reminded

me of my mother, and how could I get angry with my mom, even if she asked me what my greatest fear was?

And so, like I said, I didn't know what to say, so I just shrugged and said "don't know" again. But she wouldn't leave; she just sat there staring right at me like she expected an answer. And I guess she wasn't going to leave until I said something, so I just tried to make something up in my head right there on the spot, but that was tough because I don't really lie all that much, and making stuff up in your head is lying, and I'm not all that practiced in lying. So I sat there for a few minutes, trying to think of something to say, and, being a Christian and all I'm not all that good at lying, so I just kept thinking. And finally, I said, "Guns, I guess." She looked me right in the eye and called me a liar. Can you *believe* that? She just looked at me straight in the face and said, "Liar!" Gosh, it was just like she knew what I was thinking.

I wonder how she knew what I was thinking. What do you make of that? So, instead of thinking of what my greatest fear was, I just sat there thinking of how she could've read my mind, and I got to thinking, and I thought maybe she was like a witch or something. But she was too kind looking, too warm to be a witch. Witches have craggly noses and warts and are green-like, at least that's what I used to think when I was a kid. So, I kept bouncing back and forth between thinking of what my greatest fear was ... well, is, I guess ... and how she could've read my mind. But I think because I was trying to get my mind wrapped around two things at once, I couldn't figure out either of them. So I just looked right back at her and said, "Well, honestly, I don't know. What's yours?"

She must've been asked that already, because she didn't hesitate one bit. She answered without hesitation. She said, "I fear that I am ordinary, just like everyone." Then she said something about how she was afraid of not reaching her full potential as a human and something else about how human achievement is the ultimate test of human ability and that there's no other way to chart human progress and some other mumble-jumble like that. A lot of what she said to me was really confusing to me. She talked in circles, kept coming back to the same thing and then going on a round trip again. She kept using the word "achievement," and I kept thinking, "What does achievement have to do with life?" So I asked her that, but she just kept trying to take me back on that confusing trip again, so I stopped her, put my hand up flat like this – just like this – and she just looked at me again with those eyes, and her eyes looked like I had hurt her. Those big eyes made her look wounded. And she just stopped talking all of a sudden.

So I told her all about how her "achievement" had nothing to do with life. I told her about God and how our whole lives are about making him happy. I let her know that even if she didn't "achieve," and even if she made mistakes, that Jesus gave his life for us to make up for our transgressions. That's what I believe. I told her that the only "achievement" I knew of was satisfying our creator and that the only way we knew if we did that is if Saint Peter looks at you at the pearly gates and says, "Yep, you're in." And I talked for a couple of minutes telling her about what I thought, and it was pretty clear to me that wasn't much liking what I had to say. She kept crinkling up her nose and curling up her lip and she continued doing it more and more as I talked, but I didn't mind much, because I thought she was pretty when she did it, but still, it was pretty obvious that she didn't



think what I was saying was true, so I finally stopped talking. And I just looked at her and said, “Well, it’s all true, what I just said. It’s in a book, after all.” And she asked me which book, and I told her, “The only book that really matters.” And she said, “I don’t get it, which book is that?” So, I said, “The Bible, of course.”

When I said that, she made an even worse face than she was making before, like she was half-angry and half in pain, and she sort of stood up a bit and said, “Jesus, you freakin’ Christians are all the same.” I told her not to take the Lord’s name in vain, and she just said, “Whatever” real loud and yanked up her bag and walked to the other side of the car we were in. And when we got to the next stop, she got out of the car and walked down the platform to the next car. I saw her through the window walking into the next car, and I watched her start talking to some older lady sitting in the handicap seats near the exit, but my stop was the next stop, so I had to get off and go to work.

Boy, all day at work she was all I could think of. I couldn’t stop ... I wanted to be angry with her, but I couldn’t really. I just kept seeing her eyes. Thinking back, she had nice hair, too. Her bangs framed her eyes, drawing you into them. She had a pretty smile, too, but I didn’t see much of that smile in the last few minutes of our conversation. So, I was distracted all day at work, and even my boss said I was distracted and the guys at work starting to kid me that maybe I was thinking about a *girl*. You know how people do that, they say it all sarcastic like? So that’s what they were doing, and when I told them, “Well, yeah, I am thinking of a girl,” they all kept saying, “Yeah, right” and they wouldn’t believe that I would think about a girl. I guess they think because I’m a Christian and all that I don’t think of girls or something. Or maybe it’s because I’m so tall,

they think I wouldn't get the chance to talk to a girl. Whatever, I don't know what they were thinking.

So, anyway, I was thinking about the girl all day, and then later on, I started to think about what she asked me. My mouth to God, I'd never really thought about it, what my biggest fear is, so I started to think about it that day at work and I kept thinking about it on the whole metro ride home, hoping that I'd see the girl again, but I didn't. But the thought wouldn't get out my head, and I kept thinking, "Gosh, what *is* my biggest fear?" And I thought and thought, but nothing would come to me, so I tried to go to sleep, but I couldn't sleep. It was all I could think of. Well, I finally did fall asleep, but not until nearly four in the morning, so when I woke up like an hour later I was really tired. And you know what? I still couldn't get it out of my head, so I just started really thinking about it. I really started focusing on it, coming up with different possibilities and different combinations, like I was trying on different fears to see which one fit right. I thought about it in my bed, at the breakfast table, in my shower, while I was putting on my tie, walking to work, in the elevator, at my desk, at lunch, at dinner, and in bed again. I must've tried on fifty different fears that morning – spiders, loneliness, death, pain, heights, blindness, cancer, commitment, fire, *being* fired, airplanes, public speaking, intimacy, failure, dogs, dentists, first dates, clowns, long words, change, falling, crowds, open spaces, claustrophobia -- but none fit.

It finally hit me, when I was walking to the train again the next day. I finally understood what my greatest fear was, right as I was walking up to the down escalator going to my metro stop. And guess what!? Guess who I saw on the train that morning?

You guessed it -- the girl. That very same girl. I got on the last car, because I always get on the last car. It's usually the car with the fewest people in it, and I sat down in the typical seat I try to sit in, and there she was. She was sitting right across from me, and when I sat down she saw me and I don't think she was too happy to see me, because when she looked at me, she sat straight up. I saw her look over at the exit, but it was too late because the little "ding" that means the doors are closing already went off and she didn't have time to make it to the door. So instead she stood up and started walking toward the back of the car, trying not to look at me, but as she walked by I stopped her, by just putting my hand on her shoulder. Well, it's not that hard for me to do, to put my hand on someone's shoulder while I'm sitting. So, anyway, I stopped her right in her tracks, and I looked up at her and I said, "I know what my greatest fear is." And when I said that, she stopped, and those eyes she gave me the day before came back, apple pie warm. Her shoulder loosened under my hand, and she turned to face me and just said, "Oh."

So I said, "Oh? That's it? Don't you want to know what it is?" And she just stood there for a second or two. I guess she was just stunned or something. She didn't really say anything, so I said, "My greatest fear is that when I die they won't be able to find a coffin large enough to hold me." She tilted her head, not understanding. So I said, "Even oversized caskets are only 84 inches. I'm 88 inches tall. When I die, my family is going to have to buy a custom-made casket, which is going to be expensive. I know they'll probably be more concerned with the fact that I just died, but it's still going to leave a bad taste in their mouths. Then, when they order that custom-made casket, the casket maker is going to have to throw his designs away and start all over, at great time and expense

to him, which will probably add to his workload. He'll probably be cursing me under his breath the whole time he makes the casket. Then, whoever has to dig the hole has to dig at least another foot, which might not fit into a standard burial plot, which means it's likely my family will have to buy *two* plots, which is even more money. Anyway, a lot of people are going to be upset with me, probably even cursing me, at a time when they could be praying for my eternal soul. It could affect my chances with St. Peter, and I don't want to find out the alternative."

You know what she did? She did the strangest thing. She put her hand on my shoulder, leaned down and kissed me on the cheek. Yep, right here. Just kissed me, out of the blue. And it was nice, real nice, warm and soft, and she left a lipstick mark on my cheek.

Then she did the darndest thing. Just as the train was slowing down for a stop, as she was still leaning over from kissing me, she whispered in my ear, "Thank you. My biggest fear is that I'll never find another person who'll tell me the truth again." And the car door opened up just as she finished saying it, and she slipped out just as the 'ding' came.